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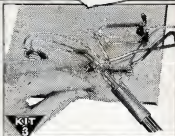
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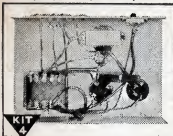
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



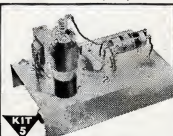
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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PLANET

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The OUTCASTS OF SOLAR III

A Sweeping Novel of Worlds Afire

by EMMETT McDOWELL

DESIGN for DOOMSDAY

by BRYCE WALTON

JONAH of the JOVE RUN

by
RAY
BRADBURY

MATTHEWS • PILTNAM • GUTH

PLANET STORIES



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MALCOLM REISS, Gen. Mgr.

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TWO FASCINATING, FULL-LENGTH NOVELS

THE OUTCASTS OF SOLAR III . . . By Emmett McDowell 6

Of all Terra's bloodily brawling billions, only mighty scientist Jon Saxon sensed the Others. Even as he swung his fists and dodged the tearing dart guns, his skin crawled weirdly. Who—who—was so coldly watching this war-torn, hell-bent planet?

DESIGN FOR DOOMSDAY By Bryce Walton 94

Slogging through Venus' reeking muck and groping horrors toward the forbidding dome of Solar Science City—treasure vault of the best brains in the System—Guardman Venard remembered the frightened whispers: "An evil god rules there!"

A GRIPPING NOVELETTE

SPACE-TRAP AT BANYA TOR By W. J. Matthews 68

Exciting entertainment, these telecasts of dashing pirates, gorgeous victims and the always stupid Space Patrol, but Jeff Thorne, famed Derelict of Mars, was grimly bent on stopping them—in all their ghastly reality!

FOUR FAST-PACED STORIES

MIND WORMS By Moses Schere 43

Glowing softly out there in the black nothingness—writhing evilly—what was their terrible power that could drive a ship's crew gibbering out the airlocks?

JONAH OF THE JOVE-RUN By Ray Bradbury 50

They hated this little beat-up old guy. Even if his crazy cosmic brain could track an asteroid clear across the Galaxy, why did he have to smash the super-sensitive meteor detectors?

PLANET IN REVERSE By Henry Guth 59

On that insanely jumbled world, their love was a solid fact. Yet he could only stare helplessly as she sobbed out on his shoulder, "Dleif emit desrever senutpen morf em evas!"

CONFUSION CARGO By Kenneth Putnam 84

The hellship hung motionless in the cold black void. Men tiptoed along her echoing corridors, gun hands trembling. What menace gripped the engines? Who was this Dr. Sims?

AND PLANET'S REGULAR FEATURES

THE VIZIGRAPH 2

P.S.'s FEATURE FLASH 126

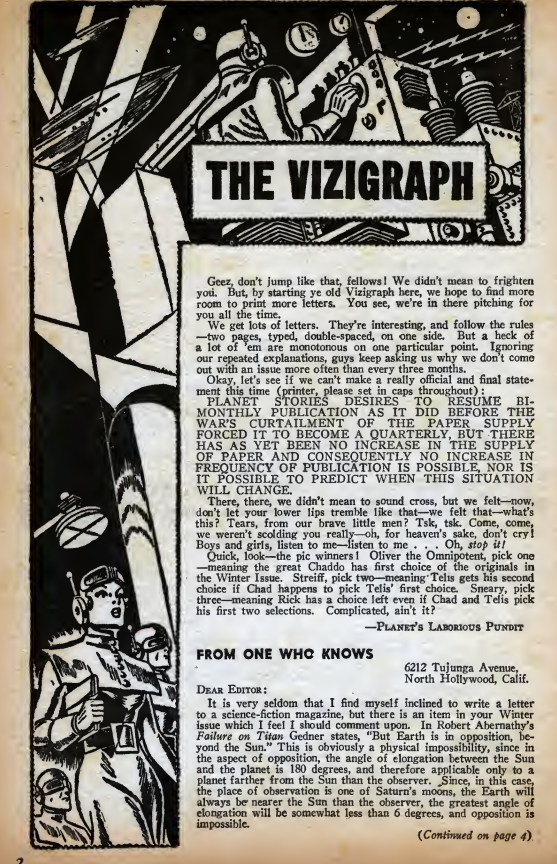
Spring Issue
Dec.-Feb.
1947-1948



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THE VIZIGRAPH

Geez, don't jump like that, fellows! We didn't mean to frighten you. But, by starting ye old Vizigraph here, we hope to find more room to print more letters. You see, we're in there pitching for you all the time.

We get lots of letters. They're interesting, and follow the rules—two pages, typed, double-spaced, on one side. But a heck of a lot of 'em are monotonous on one particular point. Ignoring our repeated explanations, guys keep asking us why we don't come out with an issue more often than every three months.

Okay, let's see if we can't make a really official and final statement this time (printer, please set in caps throughout):

PLANET STORIES DESIRES TO RESUME BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION AS IT DID BEFORE THE WAR'S CURTAILMENT OF THE PAPER SUPPLY FORCED IT TO BECOME A QUARTERLY, BUT THERE HAS AS YET BEEN NO INCREASE IN THE SUPPLY OF PAPER AND CONSEQUENTLY NO INCREASE IN FREQUENCY OF PUBLICATION IS POSSIBLE, NOR IS IT POSSIBLE TO PREDICT WHEN THIS SITUATION WILL CHANGE.

There, there, we didn't mean to sound cross, but we felt—now, don't let your lower lips tremble like that—we felt that—what's this? Tears, from our brave little men? Tsk, tsk. Come, come, we weren't scolding you really—oh, for heaven's sake, don't cry! Boys and girls, listen to me—listen to me . . . Oh, stop it!

Quick, look—the pic winners! Oliver the Omnipotent, pick one—meaning the great Chaddo has first choice of the originals in the Winter Issue. Streiff, pick two—meaning Telis gets his second choice if Chad happens to pick Telis' first choice. Sneary, pick three—meaning Rick has a choice left even if Chad and Telis pick his first two selections. Complicated, ain't it?

—PLANET'S LABORIOUS PUNDIT

FROM ONE WHO KNOWS

6212 Tujunga Avenue,
North Hollywood, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

It is very seldom that I find myself inclined to write a letter to a science-fiction magazine, but there is an item in your Winter issue which I feel I should comment upon. In Robert Abernathy's *Failure on Titan* Gedner states, "But Earth is in opposition, beyond the Sun." This is obviously a physical impossibility, since in the aspect of opposition, the angle of elongation between the Sun and the planet is 180 degrees, and therefore applicable only to a planet farther from the Sun than the observer. Since, in this case, the place of observation is one of Saturn's moons, the Earth will always be nearer the Sun than the observer, the greatest angle of elongation will be somewhat less than 6 degrees, and opposition is impossible.

(Continued on page 4)

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Yours truly, *R. M. Gray*



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Yours truly, *P. Packard*



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The aspect which Mr. Abernathy describes is that of superior conjunction, in which the inferior planet, the Sun, and the observer are situated in a straight line with the Sun in the center. I do not mean to pan Mr. Abernathy's entertaining story, because I know mistakes like this are bound to happen. In a recent issue of one of America's outstanding weekly publications, there appeared an article concerning the 200-inch telescope. In two or three places in the article, the secondary mirror of the Cassegrainian type of reflector was referred to as a *concave* mirror when it should have read *convex* mirror—a very vital error which somehow bypassed all the scientists, editors and copyreaders. (*We feel better!*—Ed.)

I notice that Mr. Sigler computes that it would take about 177 quintillion tons of spores to provide one pound on the Earth's surface. Out of idle curiosity, I figured the amount and derived an answer of some 18 or 19 sextillion tons, about 100 times Mr. Sigler's result and approximately three times the mass of the Earth. I may be wrong, but it would take several spores either way.

I am also going to take exception to Mr. Sigler's statement concerning Mars. He states that astronomers have been photographing the polar icecaps for nearly a century, and thereby concludes that there is surface water on Mars. These conditions have been photographed for many years, but as yet their composition has not been ascertained. It is indeed possible that they are composed of some form of precipitation, as their seasonal behavior might indicate, but a recent delicate spectroscopic analysis of the atmosphere of Mars at Mount Wilson Observatory could detect no trace of either oxygen or water vapor. This does not prove that there is no water on Mars, but that it is present only in insignificant amounts, if at all.

One current theory regarding the red planet is that a former ozone layer in the extremely rare atmosphere of Mars accelerated surface oxidation until the free oxygen was depleted. The red color might then be attributed to iron rust. What water vapor remained might have been enough to form thin snow or frost caps at the poles and perhaps small patches of fog. This, however, is only *conjecture*, and no definite proof as to the existence or non-existence of either oxygen or water vapor has been discovered to date.

Animal life, as we know it, is almost certainly precluded by the absence of adequate supplies of water and oxygen, but there may be enough present to sustain certain forms of plant life, which might possibly account for certain seasonal changes in the appearance of the planet's surface. Conditions on Mars are still anyone's guess and we must await the advent of new and greatly improved scientific instruments before the enigma of Mars can be solved.

Sincerely yours,

—JAMES DOGGETT,

Teaching Asst., Astronomy Dept. UCLA

FOX LETS FLY

52 Crotty Avenue,
Yonkers 4, N. Y.

DEAR PAUL:

Please insert a sheet of asbestos in your VIZI-GRAPH section and let me do a slow burn on it. I get a bang out of most of the comments on my yarns in PLANET, but when Telis Streiff blithely states in the last issue that my *Vassals* story is a direct copy of Hank Kuttner's *The Dark World*, I see red.

Now I know Hank fairly well, and he's one swell guy and I think he's tops as a writer—but I don't "copy" his stories. Or anybody else's, for that matter!

Vassals was reposing in the trophy room at PLANET, bought and paid for, before *The Dark World* hit the stands. Matter of fact, the idea for *Vassals* came to me in the early summer of '45. I cut and added and played around with it during the fall and winter, finished it up and sent it on to you while the snows were still around. Altogether, I spent six to eight months on the thing, and to have Streiff pass it off as a "direct copy" . . . ohh, murder!

While we're on the subject, I'd like to add that I don't write my stories in a hurry. This past winter I tore up fifteen thousand words of a yarn headed for PLANET because I wasn't satisfied with it. I started over again, from scratch. It will be done eventually, but now I'm beginning to wonder who's gonna get the credit for it—if any!

So let the guys and gals go on telling me they don't like the "blood and guts" I insert, or the "tough guy" writing—but for Pete's sake lemme keep my own stories!

Incidentally, speaking about the "blood and guts" and "tough guy" business, let me ask the crowd what type of men would they guess to be out there in space—when and if space travel is accomplished? My thought is that they'll be plenty tough, and rough. The planets will be like the frontiers of our own west in the '70s and '80s. (If you don't think so, write in and tell PLP, about it.)

Thanks for the space, Paul. Be seein' ya over a mug of broth one of these days.

The best,

—GARDNER F. FOX

BOINNGG, QUEEN OF HUBBA

4018 Colborne Road,
Baltimore 29, Maryland

DEAR EDITOR:

Never before were stories as hard to rate as those in the Winter ish. I started reading the mag with a blank expression on my face and when I finished I still had the blank expression. There was no look of utter joy or amusement, nor was my nose wrinkled in disgust. And yet I wouldn't say the stories were just mediocre. Okay, so I'm nuts.

Anyhow, if I must place one of the stories first, and some in the middle, and one last, well . . .

The Running of the Zar . . . Tsk, tsk, what would Joe Stalin say if he read that title? Good, nevertheless.

Duel in Black . . . First in the Sun, then on the Moon. These jerks have duels everywhere nowadays. Also good.

Me, Myself, and I . . . These stories of time travel intrigue me. But what I don't get is how come if when Mac I was standing by the rock when Mac II got there, that the first time when Mac I was standing there, why didn't Mac II come since both times are the same time? Or don't you follow me?

Failure on Titan . . . Not much to it, I would say.

Among the Scented Ones . . . How very appropriate this title is. Among the scented ones, to be sure.

Earth Is Missing . . . What was missing about it? Hmmm?

Earthbound . . . All I can say is that if, when I was twelve, I told my parents that I was going

out back to build an airplane to fly to China, they would toss me in the nearest strait-jacket.

Black Priestess of Varda . . . Oh sob! How I hate these stories that begin, "Oscar Plotz sat in his lab testing a new experiment. He took the ladle of hot lead and poured it into a test tube of water. When he woke up, he was in the arms of a becaaaaauuuutiful woman. She spoke, 'I am Boinggg, Queen of Hubba.'"

Now for the letters. Give the first second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth choice of letters to Telis Streiff. Like to split my girdle. Give the slop that's left to Sneary, and Chaddo.

Love and Kisses,

—JOE KIRSCHNICK

WHO WINS THE HUMAN RACE?

1028 N. Broadway,
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

As to the latest *PLANET* will have to say that *Me, Myself and I* was the only really good story in the issue. I came pretty close to busting my sides laughing. How about some more yarns of that nature?

Wasn't impressed by Eric Fennel's yarn. He reminds me of a little boy who has just been told about the birds and the bees and desires to impress his playmates with his superior knowledge. Where I work there is a sawed-off shrimp with a peanut-size brain and a ball-bearing jaw who knows more naughty words than Mr. Fennel does and, what is worse, insists on reciting them from dawn to dusk. So I can't say that such stuff is enough of a novelty that I like to pay good cash to see such blah in print. Congratulate McWilliams on his restraint in illustrating the yarn. He showed better taste than Mr. Fennel did.

Since the boys are landing on me in regard to that race deal, I would like to ask if they think a duck-billed Ubangi is the mental equal of an Anglo-Saxon? No matter what they say about the matter, there is a difference in the mental ability and drive of the different races. I would suggest that they go to a library and read up on the Oriental and African savages. They might learn a few things. In regard to the Japanese matter, I would like to point out that I was merely showing why there would not be any large-scale Asiatic migration to the planets. Any person who has really studied the matter would have to say that the Japanese would be the best bet of the Oriental peoples if we would let them. Naturally, we would not permit them to do so.

As for the American Indians, they held this continent in fee simple for centuries without improving anything simply because they didn't have the mental drive to do so. At the time of Columbus there were about half a million Indians on this continent and they were constantly fighting over hunting grounds. Now we have nearly one hundred and fifty million in the same territory. No difference in race? Don't make me laugh.

At the present rate of increase in the Hindu population, it would be necessary to remove about two hundred million of them in a space of about twenty years to relieve the congestion for about a century. A hundred passenger spaceship would cost a good five million dollars and perhaps be able to make two trips a year between Earth and Venus. It would undoubtedly cost a good thou-

(Continued on page 120)

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Saxon made it to the head of the ladder. Then he, too, lost control over his muscles.



The Outcasts Of Solar III

By Emmett McDowell

Of all Terra's bloodily brawling billions, only mighty scientist Jon Saxon sensed the Others. Even as he swung his fists and dodged the tearing dart guns, his skin crawled weirdly. Who—who—was so coldly watching this war-torn, hell-bent planet?

QUIET!" JON SAXON'S VOICE was a breath in the night as he cautioned the girl. A warning prickle of danger had run over his skin like gooseflesh. He was a big man, over six

feet, with thick brawny shoulders and arms like a blacksmith. Before the girl could cry out, Saxon swept her into the deep shadow of a doorway. His dark gray eyes probed the street but he could see no one.

This seventh level thoroughfare of Adirondaka appeared utterly deserted. Only occasional street lamps revealed glimpses of the magnificent architecture of the post-atom capitol of Earth. Down the center of the boulevard the public conveyor swept silently, endlessly without a passenger anywhere along its ribbon-like length.

"Where are they?" the girl whispered.

He shook his head. "I can't see them." But his skin continued to prickle its warning. Somewhere in the shadows were men, several of them, stalking him soundlessly.

He became aware of an alien quality about the figures ringing in him and the girl, figures he could sense but not see. Still nothing moved in the street. The girl, he realized, was strangely quiescent.

Then, sharp as speech, her thought impinged on Jon Saxon's consciousness. *"The fools! And after I told Emil not to let them crowd him!"*

Jon Saxon's eyes narrowed. So the girl thought the invisible figures were G. A.'s men. He had known, of course, from their first meeting that the girl was a General Atomic spy. But by not so much as a hint had he let her suspect that her very thoughts betrayed her.

The tingling sensation intensified, warned him that the shadows were closing in. The feel of alienism was stronger, as if they were not quite human. His heart pumped faster, the pulse throbbing in his ears.

The moon was rising, he saw, competing indifferently with the street lights. Its rays streamed down through the ninety-eight levels of the capitol, down through crystal plastic roadways into the dense blackness of the pit itself.

Again he became aware of the girl's thought, *"Why, there's nothing here! He's imagining things!"* It was accompanied by a wave of relief, and at the same time she whispered,

"What is it Jon? What do you see?"

"Hold it, Ileth!"

His hands gripped her slender shoulders, silenced her. The public conveyor still swept past without a sound.

Bewilderment grew in him.

The alien entities were close, all about them, apparently without substance. The tingling sensations were like hot and cold flashes now, signaling him of something

present, something which he couldn't identify.

They were not the girl's men, whatever she thought. He would have recognized them by their feel.

No, these escaped classification. He had never experienced anything like them before. His strange sixth sense, the first extra-human sense which he had begun to develop inexplicably in his twenty seventh year, could perceive nothing beyond their presence.

He took his hand from Ileth's shoulders, groped for the button controlling the door against which they crouched.

"Stop!"

The thought rang like a bell in his skull.

Jon Saxon stiffened. *"What is it?"* he concentrated. *"Who are you?"*

Again the bodiless thought struck into his mind.

"That is not for you to know—now or possibly ever. The girl is working for General Atomic. Do not allow yourself to be duped. It is decidedly not our policy that General Atomic or any of the corporations learn the secret of the stellar drive!"

SAXON'S eyes opened with surprise. He had no intention of giving G. A. the secret of the stellar drive. It was a government secret, for one thing . . .

"We are quite aware of your intentions," came the telepathic communication. *"Otherwise, you would no longer be."*

Saxon swallowed dryly, realized his palms were sweating. He glanced at Ileth. The moonlight had crept into the doorway, illuminating her oval face clearly. He noted the perplexed slant to her fine black brows, the sober, half frightened expression clouding her patrician features.

"Why don't we go?" she asked. "What are you waiting for?"

"In a minute."

He sent his thought probing out toward the alien minds. And brought up sharp before an absolute mental barrier.

No neophytes here. Whatever the creatures were, they were masters of thought-transference. Excitement sent the blood surging through Saxon's veins, blotted out momentarily his alarm.

Until this moment, he had believed himself unique, the single telepath on Earth.

He had been thirty-one when he first be-

came aware of his telepathic potential. It had developed overnight, a seventh extra-human sense, that isolated him forever from the rest of mankind.

There had been something indecent, prying about seeing into the minds of his fellows—like a peeping Tom. It had been intolerable at first, the naked baring of souls before him, intolerable and shocking, until he had learned to block out their thoughts.

He felt the girl shiver against him.

"But what are you afraid of, Jon?"

He didn't answer because the alien thoughts intruded on his mind again.

"This is a warning, Jon Saxon. Do not divulge the stellar drive to anyone. It is not and never was intended for you to know. Only the unfortunate development of a telepathic sense enabled you to steal it from Villainowski's brain . . ."

"I didn't steal it!" Saxon thought indignantly. *"I worked with Villainowski building the ship. It would have been impossible for me not to learn it."*

"Exactly," came the reply. *"And your continued existence hinges entirely on your silence."*

A chill wind blew up Saxon's spine, but it only fanned the flame of eagerness which had sprung up in him. Here were others like himself, possessed of telepathic powers.

"Who are you?" he thought passionately.

He realized in dismay that the prickling in skin and scalp had diminished. The telepaths were withdrawing, deserting him without a hint of further contact.

"Who are you? How can I find you?"

Nothing!

He and the girl were alone again in the moonlit doorway.

A strange sense of exhilaration replaced Saxon's first feeling of letdown. There were other telepaths on Earth and sometime, someplace their paths would cross again. He stepped into the street, saying to Ileth, "Let's go. I was mistaken. There's no one here."

In the rays of the street lamp, he looked more like a pugilist than a Government Bureau of Research man and one of Terra's top nuclear physicists. He had a big nose, twice broken, strong white teeth and a square massive jaw. He caught the girl's thought and grinned down at her.

"He's not handsome," she was thinking, *"not by any standard, but when he grins like that you don't think about his looks and virility radiates from him like heat waves. He's a dangerous man! Emil under-rates him!"*

"Hadden't we better take the conveyer?" she asked aloud.

JON SAXON nodded, swung the girl lightly by her elbows to the pick-up, transferred to commuter, then express. They found seats while the buildings flowed past on either hand like a speeded-up movie.

"You have a frightening job," said Ileth, looking up at him from big hazel-green eyes. Her shiny black hair she wore in a shoulder length page-boy bob. She smoothed her short-waisted chartreuse jacket over small firm breasts. "I'm surprised Government lets you go out without your body-guard."

"They don't." Saxon's unprepossessing features lit with a boyish grin. "But I slip away from them once in a while."

"You were afraid of an ambush back there in the street?"

He nodded. "Yes. I thought one of the corporations may have got wind of my escapade."

The girl, he saw from her thoughts, was satisfied with his explanation.

In these days of savage competition, the big corporations maintained their own factories and laboratories. General Atomic, Tri-World, Amalgamated Plastic, a score of lesser companies employed staffs of technicians and research scientists. The lives of these men were fraught with a peculiar danger. They were subject to bribery, kidnapping and torture by the spy agencies of rival companies in their efforts to extort from them any new discovery or guarded scientific process their corporations might possess. Independent agencies manned by corrupt technicians had men everywhere.

The corporations protected themselves by confining their technicians to barracks and never permitting them to wander forth unescorted. It was a condition which Jon Saxon found little better than slavery. The constant surveillance irked him to the point of rebellion.

Now he was confronted suddenly with the fact that he had been under observation of an infinitely more subtle kind as

well. Some group was keeping constant watch upon his mind. But who?

Ileth sighed and laid her sleek black head on his shoulder. "Jon, you've been so quiet tonight. Is it because tomorrow the expedition leaves for Alpha Centauri?"

"I don't know. I'm not afraid, exactly. We know the drive is practicable, but it's the first attempt man's ever made to reach the stars. We've never been beyond the Solar System before, Ileth."

He felt the girl's arms slip around his neck, cling with surprising strength. "I'm afraid, Jon. I wish you weren't going."

"What are you afraid of?"

Ileth bit her lower lip. She was feeling rather than thinking, Saxon realized, a mental chaos bubbling in the primitive thalamic regions of her nervous system, a formless intuition of disaster stalking the first expedition into stellar space.

"I—I don't know exactly," she confessed. "I don't understand it, Jon."

Saxon's eyes narrowed. He had intercepted that dread of the expedition's fate before. He had felt it emanating from hundreds of individuals otherwise unrelated. It was like a hypnotically imposed command: "*Don't venture into the Stellar Depths!*"

And it always stemmed from the subconscious, the regions of the human mind telepathically closed to him. At first he'd been inclined to think it was dread of the unknown. But now he was not so sure.

Facts, Saxon knew, were assimilated by the subconscious, later to emerge as hunches and intuition. He had grown to believe that there must be reason behind this universal fear of stellar space.

He had even felt it in himself; in his chief, Villainowski; in his co-workers at Government's Bureau of Research. It was a very real feeling that nothing but disaster for the human race could come of this venture to the stars.

II

ILETH'S APARTMENT WAS ON the ninety-eighth level, flush against the transparent plastic dome which hermetically sealed in Adirondaka.

Jon Saxon followed the girl out of the lift, watching her with admiration.

She was a slim, long legged creature in chartreuse green, jodhpur-like trousers that

moulded her slender waist and rounded hips with amazing fidelity before flaring at her thighs.

Ileth Urban was as fetching a bit of scientist-bait as General Atomic could have desired.

All the corporations used these girls. They scoured the Solar System for the cleverest, most beautiful ones to be found. They paid them fantastic wages and trained them to worm secrets from susceptible males. Scientific Mata Hari's.

Government itself used them, Saxon was fully aware. Only by employing even more ruthless measures than the corporations was government able to maintain itself. Government had the finest research department anywhere. And the Terrestrial Intelligence Service was the most efficient organization of its kind. Not only that; Government had power, power unbelievable in its Space Navy.

Ileth paused, allowing him to come abreast of her, her hazel-green eyes smiling at him.

Saxon hastily blocked out her thoughts in embarrassment. "*You're a pretty little Judas,*" he thought, then glanced up as a bright glare lit the night sky.

A trail of orange flame streaked above the city and disappeared like a meteor in reverse. The *Morning Star*, a crack luxury liner, was heading out for Venus. It must be nineteen hours.

"Our last night," said Ileth softly. "Tomorrow we'll be leaving for Alpha Centauri like that ship."

They had reached a door in the glistening plastic face of a building. The door opened automatically, responsive to the girl's personal vibration.

Saxon saw a lambent darkness beyond the entrance. The ceiling of Ileth's apartment was the transparent rind of the city itself. The moon streamed through the crystal plastic, lighting it faintly.

His nerves tightened, his sixth sense of feel exploring the apartment for a trap.

But no warning tingle prickled his skin. Then the lights came on as Ileth passed inside. They glowed from the walls like cold flame.

With a sigh of relief, Saxon saw that the chamber was empty.

"Sit down," said Ileth, "I'll get you a drink." She disappeared through a door-

way across the room, stripping her yellow green jacket from her shoulders as she went.

Jon Saxon sank onto a lounge, following Ileth's progress by her thoughts.

"Soda. Where's that soda? Oh, here it is. Emil must have put it there. Like a man." Then, "Contact Emil?"

A moment's indecision. Saxon could almost hear the girl thinking. "Not yet," she decided with a mental shiver. "Saxon would be no good to us dead." Then, "Make the drink strong. Take a gallon to make him drunk. Big brute. Shoulders like a door. I could . . ."

Saxon hastily blocked out her thought in embarrassment. The girl's mind was too graphic.

For the hundredth time his brain grappled with the identity of those alien telepaths who had warned him in the street tonight.

The radiation branch of Government's Bureau of Research had been experimenting with thought projection. Could they have been successful? It might account for the alien feel he had experienced for that impenetrable barrier which had defeated his attempt to reach their minds.

A machine?

Unconsciously, he shook his head. His sixth sense, the ability not only to feel a presence but identify it almost as if he were seeing it, convinced him that there had been life in the street, a strange invisible form of life possibly; but the reality of it was inescapable. In some ways his heightened sense of feel was more reliable than his ears or eyes.

Ileth returned bearing a tray with glasses, a decanter of whiskey and soda. "I wasn't long, was I?"

THERE was a hard bright glitter in her hazel green eyes. Saxon saw that she had changed to a halter and skirt of Martian microweb. He swallowed, feeling a pulse beginning to tick in his throat. The microweb was as black as the girl's hair, but not anywhere so thick.

Only her cold determination to keep him there until after the sailing, which he could feel like a dash of cold water, defeated her purpose.

She handed him a glass, set the tray on an end table, switched on the telecaster.

Instead of music, the newscaster was blaring forth the announcement of the expedition to Alpha Centauri.

"...greatest page in the annals of the Empire. Tomorrow at nine hours the *Shooting Star* with a picked crew, with a staff of specialists and representatives from all the great corporations will blast off from Alpha Centauri.

"Under the directorship of John Villainowski of Government's Bureau of Research, the man who developed the stellar drive, the expedition plans to investigate the planetary systems of the Centaurian suns.

"His excellency, Mustapha IX, will be present..."

Ileth snapped off the telecaster.

"Jon," she asked and leaned against him, "why did you sneak out tonight of all nights?"

He sensed the girl's tension, knew that it would be difficult to fool her. Suddenly, he decided to quit beating around the bush and strike straight into the heart of the opposing forces.

"I know you're an agent of General Atomic, Ileth. I've..." He paused.

Ileth had gasped and drawn back from him. Her thoughts were in turmoil. "Emil! I must reach Emil!" was clear.

Saxon went on inexorably. "I've wind of a plot by General Atomic against the *Shooting Star*. If they could get their hands on the stellar drive, no doubt they could control deep space. They'd be in a position to dictate to Government."

Ileth was thinking furiously now, Saxon realized, trying to figure how much he knew and how much he was guessing.

He laughed without amusement. He knew damned little, too damned little.

Only this morning, he had intercepted the stray thought of one of his co-workers and realized that the man had sold out to General Atomic. To his horror he had read in the man's mind where General Atomic, after securing the stellar drive, intended to overthrow Government.

How General Atomic planned to get the drive, who else was in the plot, the man hadn't known. He had been bribed to take orders from a GA agent, whom he knew only as Q62.

Saxon couldn't inform the T.I.S. of his knowledge. He had no proof, except what

he had read in this one man's mind.

He had told Villainowski of his suspicions. The chief had promised to set the T.I.S. onto the case, but they had turned up no evidence of any kind against the great corporation.

General Atomic had done its work with utmost secrecy, not letting its right hand know what its left hand was doing.

Saxon was desperate. He grasped the girl's slight shoulders. "What do you know about it, Ileth?"

"I don't know anything. Oh Lord, Jon, I'm to be General Atomic's representative aboard the *Shooting Star*, and they've told me nothing of any plot against the ship. Nothing, Jon, I swear it."

With a disheartening feeling of defeat, Jon realized the girl was telling the truth. She had been told nothing of General Atomic's plan. She, too, he read in her frightened thoughts, had been instructed to take orders from a General Atomic's agent whom she knew as Q62.

"Who's Q62?" he shot at her.

Ileth's hazel-green eyes were enormous. "You! How did you know?"

"Who's Q62?"

"I don't know. I've never met him."

"How will you know him?"

"I don't know. They said he would be able to identify himself. That's all. They wouldn't tell me how."

All at once Saxon's skin began to prickle its warning of danger. He released the girl, wheeled towards the door just as it was flung viciously back.

He saw three men in the opening and reached for his dart gun.

With a half sob, Ileth hurled herself on him, bearing him backward to the couch, her arms around his chest, her long legs tangled with his.

"Emil!" she panted. "Quick! He's got a gun!"

"Easy. Easy. Easy," said a man's low amused voice.

Jon Saxon succeeded in throwing Ileth off his chest and surging to his feet. He found himself staring into the tiny barrel of a dart gun. The dart gun was being held steady as a rock by a gray-eyed, yellow-haired man with a faint smile on his wide thin lips.

Saxon let his hand fall away from his holster.

"Get his gun, Ileth."

"Right, Emil."

Saxon felt the girl's cool fingers slip inside his blouse, pluck his automatic from his holster.

"Has he any other weapons?"

She patted Saxon deftly, impersonally, shook her head, her black hair swinging.

"No. That's all."

The blond man lowered his gun. "You may sit down, sir."

Saxon sat down.

THERE were two others behind the blond man but Saxon kept his eyes on Emil, recognizing a dangerous type. Obviously well educated, intelligent, the blond man was fiercely loyal to General Atomic.

Not such a queer combination in these times, Saxon thought; when the corporations had come to replace countries in men's loyalties.

The anarchist revolt against Bureau-cratic-Socialism had seriously weakened Terra and corporate business had fought its way back to power. Determined never again to permit the sacred laws of property to be so violated, it had fastened its tentacles to the very roots of society. It organized a government in an image of itself—a corporate government.

Men became known no longer as American or Spanish but as General Atomic men, or Tri-World men, or Corporate Government men and were as blindly patriotic to their corporations as they had been in earlier ages to the lands of their birth.

Such a one, Saxon recognized, was Emil of General Atomic, a fanatic who would consider it the greatest honor to die for his company.

"You realize, sir," said Emil, "that we regret very much what we must do."

"Why do it, then?" Jon Saxon asked bluntly.

The blond Emil looked shocked. "Are you suggesting treason, sir?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," replied Saxon, who had already read his death sentence in Emil's brain. "But you don't expect me to give you any information, when you plan to kill me immediately after."

Emil's expression was vaguely disturbed. "Nonsense! I'm commissioned to offer you



With a half sob, Ieth hurled herself on him.

a post in General Atomic's research department at twice your present salary, if you can give us the information we wish."

But Saxon still read nothing but inexorable death in Emil's mind.

"Eyewash," he said.

In the ensuing silence the men's thoughts beat at Saxon's brain like the confusing racket of people talking all at once.

At length Emil moved aside, saying, "We're prepared for obstinacy. Georg, take over."

A plump man of middle age drew up a chair facing Saxon.

"Georg," explained Emil, "is an N.P.A."

Saxon stared into the moon faced neural-psychoanalyst. The man possessed the most unusual pair of twinkling blue eyes like bits of glass, a smooth pink face, thin sandy hair. He was dressed like Emil in loose, comfortable coveralls of a gray siliconex.

He took Saxon's wrist, said pleasantly, "Hmmm, pulse rapid but strong. Unusual

nervous control. Strip to the waist, if you please."

As Saxon pulled off his blouse, the plump N.P.A. turned to the third man, obviously his assistant, and said, "Bring the machine, Alph."

The man called Alph lugged a heavy case in front of the couch, opened it. Georg began to attach saucer shaped suction discs to Saxon's temples, the base of his skull, his solar plexus. Wires led from the discs to the machine in the black case.

"Quite ready," said Georg to Emil. "Ask any questions you wish."

Saxon could feel a delicate tingle rippling up his spine into his brain like a mild electric shock. Emil asked, "Do you know the secret of Villainowski's stellar drive?"

"No," returned Saxon. "That's preposterous. No one understands that except Villainowski himself. Do you think Gov-

ernment would be so stupid as to let the secret out?"

The plump N.P.A. who had been studying a bank of dials, looked up and said, "He's lying. From that I would infer that he understands the stellar drive."

"What?" gasped Emil.

With a sinking heart Jon Saxon realized that the blond man had not been expecting such luck. They had thought that he might be able to give them some clue to the stellar drive, but not that he actually could reproduce it.

"What's his torture coefficient?" Emil shot at the N.P.A.

Georg adjusted several dials. The tingling became livid fire coursing up Saxon's spine. His eyes closed, he crushed his lips between his teeth until a trickle of blood coursed down his chin.

The room swayed sickeningly. Sweat burst from his pores, made his sick white face glisten in the indirect lighting.

Then as sudden as it came, the fire smoldered and died out of his spine.

He heard the N.P.A. speak in an awed voice, "His torture coefficient is below his will to live. He'll die first."

EMIL began to stride nervously back and forth before the lounge. He swung suddenly on Saxon, saying, "Look, that post on General Atomic's research bureau is still open. I can promise you three times your present salary, and a bonus besides."

"Liar," replied Saxon without hesitation. "I don't need a machine to tell you're lying." He laughed shortly.

The N.P.A.'s plump face looked puzzled. He made rapid adjustments on the machine, bent over the dials again.

"He's not lying," he said in a queer voice. "He knows you intend to kill him as soon as you squeeze him dry of information."

Saxon caught sight of Ileth's white, strained face and grinned at her. She had been as surprised, he read her thoughts, as himself at Emil's opportune entrance. Obviously, Emil had not been supposed to put in an appearance until she had a try at him first.

It was all verification that General Atomic was trying to steal the stellar drive. But Saxon had been able to catch only the scantiest of details from Emil's mind.

General Atomic not only wanted the drive, he sensed, but a monopoly on it. That meant killing or buying off everyone in Government's Bureau of Research who knew the secret of the drive.

Emil said to Saxon, "Suppose I contact General Atomic and put it up to them. I'll confess my orders were to question you, then dispose of you. Frankly, Ileth's reports have convinced us that you couldn't be bought."

"What makes you think that I can now? Anyway, what guarantee have I that their promises aren't as empty as yours?" he asked sceptically.

Georg, the neuro-psychoanalyst, pursed thick lips and interjected himself into the conversation. "General Atomic abides by its contracts," he pointed out.

"Yes. When it's to their advantage."

Emil's eyes blazed; red stained his pale cheek. "Do you mean to imply, sir, that General Atomic is treacherous?"

"Exactly."

"Emil!" said the plump N.P.A., sharply.

Slowly the flush receded from Emil's cheeks, but he held himself stiff as a ramrod and his eyes were angry.

The N.P.A. turned back to Saxon. "At least, you admit that General Atomic abides by its contracts as long as it's to their advantage."

Saxon nodded, seeing already what was coming.

"Then," pursued Georg. "It certainly would be to their advantage to preserve you alive until you could build a stellar drive. After that . . ." He shrugged. "You're an intelligent man, Saxon. Rated one of the best physicists in the Empire, in fact. It seems to me that you could easily convince General Atomic that it would be of advantage to them to keep you alive indefinitely. What would you say to a hundred thousand credits a year?"

"Not enough."

"Two hundred thousand?"

"One or two . . ." Saxon began, then paused in consternation. He had been tricked!

There was a self-satisfied smile on the neuro-psychoanalyst's pudgy features. He had not spoken aloud the words, "Two hundred thousand," but had thought them at Saxon!

"He's a telepath!" said the N.P.A., and

began to disconnect the discs from Saxon's body and stow them back in the case.

"A telepath!" Emil ejaculated. "He's a telepath?"

"Exactly," agreed the N.P.A. in dry tones. "I suspected it from the first, but frankly I couldn't believe it. I've never encountered a true telepath before. I didn't think there were any. Individuals who are unusually canny at reading expression, yes. But never any true telepaths. I'm going to request General Atomic to let me perform an autopsy after he's been disposed of. Possibly he's a mutant."

"Disposed of?" ejaculated the blond Emil. "But great stars, Georg! He's invaluable to us. Not only does he possess the secret of the stellar drive, but he can..."

"You're the executive!" retorted Georg sharply, "but I advise you to shoot him now! This second!"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not stupid, man! How much information has he picked from our brains already? If he should escape, the plan would have to be sacrificed. Everything might be lost." Then, sharply, "And don't think about the plan! Shoot him!"

Saxon could read growing conviction in the blond man's mind. He saw Emil's hand, holding the dart gun, begin to rise.

"Look out, Emil!" shrieked Ileth suddenly.

But Saxon had already snatched the plump N.P.A. off his feet, yanking him between himself and Emil. He heard a sharp plop. The N.P.A.'s body quivered as it intercepted Emil's poisoned dart. Saxon realized he was holding aloft a dead man.

The muscles in his burly naked shoulders hunched. He hurled the dead N.P.A. at the blond man who went down, bowled over backwards by the body.

Emil's head struck the plastic floor with a sickening crunch. Saxon caught a painful mental flash as unconsciousness gripped the blond man.

Without a pause, he leaped for Ileth. The girl was fumbling at her waist, where her gun's muzzle had become entangled. Only the fact that the muzzle had caught in her waist band saved him.

She flinched back as Saxon's hand closed on the gun, tore it loose from her grip.

There was a rip of cloth and the dart gun came away. Ileth's skirt, freed of its supporting waistband, slid down about her ankles.

Saxon leaped backward, threatening the N.P.A.'s flabbergasted assistant as well as the girl.

"Don't move! Either of you."

The N.P.A.'s assistant was obviously terrified and had no intention of budging.

"Oh, my skirt!" Ileth's wild thought came clear as a bell to Saxon, and the girl rolled her eyes toward her feet, where the cloth lay in a black ring. But she didn't move.

Saxon grinned. "Obviously," he said, "you haven't any weapon concealed about yourself. You can pick up your skirt, Ileth."

She snatched it about her waist again, holding the foot long tear together with her hand.

"I'm leaving," he said, "but remember, I can read your thoughts. If either of you make a move towards that audio during the next ten minutes, I'll pop back in and fill you as full of darts as a porcupine."

And he backed, still grinning, through the door.

III

THE HUGE STRUCTURE, housing Government's Bureau of Research, was aflame with light when Saxon climbed from the robot cab and approached the entrance. The shadowy figure of a guard challenged him.

Saxon produced his papers, submitted to a fingerprint test.

"So, it's you, all right," the guard growled. "Where the hell have you been? The T.I.S. has been scouring the city for you."

Saxon asked, "Is Villainowski in? I want to see him."

"Not half as bad," said the guard, "as he wants to see you." He stuck his head inside the guardroom, yelled, "Hey, Webb, come relieve me. That missing physicist has shown up. I've got to take him up to the chief."

"I can find my way," Saxon assured him dryly.

"I've got my orders," retorted the man, "to escort you, and escorted you'll be."

As they took the lift, Saxon probed

gently into the guard's mind. He was thinking about a Venusian dancer performing at the Sun Palace on Greater Broadway. Either he didn't know why Villainowski wanted him, or he was more interested in the dancer.

Saxon sighed in resignation.

Chief Villainowski was a small wiry man of Polish descent who had led none too reputable a life, although it was not generally known. Jon Saxon, regarding him across the polished desk, read suspicion and wonder in the chief's mind. Villainowski was never able to reconcile Saxon's appearance with his indisputable scientific attainments.

"Looks like a plug ugly," Villainowski was thinking although he was far from a beauty himself. *"Ought to be a prize fighter instead of a physicist!"*

"Will you pray tell me," he asked aloud of the amused Saxon, "what the hell possessed you to sneak out the night before we leave?"

Saxon grinned like a mastiff. "It was that General Atomic affair. I haven't told you, but I met one of their agents, a girl by the name of Ieth Urban, about a month ago."

"Black-headed girl?" asked the third man in the room. He had his chair leaned against the wall. A tall, angular, sandy-haired man with pale blue eyes like gimlets. "Does she have bazel-green eyes, small delicate features? Ears peaked like an animals..."

"I hadn't noticed the ears," Saxon confessed, swinging toward the sandy-haired man.

Gavin Murdock, T.I.S. agent, had been assigned as T.I.S. representative to this first expedition beyond the Solar System. He said, "No, I guess not. She wears her hair in a page-boy bob."

Villainowski interrupted: "Well, damn it, man, who gave you permission to horn in on the T.I.S.'s work?"

"I knew her. She'd been set to pump me dry of information by General Atomic. If anyone could get anything out of her, I could."

"You don't fancy yourself much," the chief grunted with a touch of asperity. "What did you find out?"

Saxon related events just as they had transpired, omitting only the alien tele-

paths in the street and his own telepathic ability.

"By Pluto!" exploded Villainowski when he had concluded. "We can grab the lot of them."

"Not so fast," Murdock interrupted from his chair against the wall. "What proof have you? Only Saxon's word. It won't hold in a court of law."

"But the girl!" Villainowski protested. "She's General Atomic's representative on the expedition. You don't intend to let her—"

"It's better to have her where we can watch her," the T.I.S. agent returned. "Saxon can keep an eye on her. He seems to be able to pry more out of her than any of my agents have. If he can persuade her that he hasn't told us about the fracas in her apartment..."

"I can convince her of that, I think," said Saxon. "But she doesn't know anything..."

"Except," Murdock interrupted again, "that she's to take orders from an agent known as Q62. At least, she should lead us to him." He paused, regarded Saxon with his penetrating pale blue eyes. "What the devil did you do to her, man, to get that information out of her? Stick darts under her finger nails?"

In both Murdock's and Villainowski's mind Saxon read a cold determination to keep him under surveillance as well as the girl.

VILLAINOWSKI, he knew, hated the corporations in general, but it was nothing to the black flame of hatred that consumed the man whenever he thought of General Atomic. It was almost psychopathic. He had never forgotten or forgiven General Atomic, Saxon knew, for stealing his first three discoveries and then disgracing him.

It was a queer friendship that existed between the two men questioning Saxon—the gaunt cold-blooded manhunter, who had sent a girl with whom he was infatuated to the Lunar Penal Colony, and Villainowski, the small wiry scientist, ex-Jovian slaver, and at present head of the first expedition into deep space.

"Well," the sandy-haired Murdock repeated inexorably, "how did she happen to tell you about Q62?"

"It was a slip," explained Saxon. "I followed it up."

"She's not given to making slips," Murdock pointed out. "Not Ileth Urban."

When Saxon didn't reply, the T.I.S. agent said, "Saxon, we've investigated your past pretty thoroughly. We did the same with every man and woman connected with this expedition. We encountered a strange thing. Saxon, who are your parents?"

Jon Saxon could feel his stomach contract. "I don't know. I haven't any recollection before my eleventh year." He could feel Murdock's probing blue eyes, sense his scepticism.

"You've a convenient memory, because we've been unable to find any trace of your parents or birth prior to your enrollment in the Institute. A thousand years ago your case would have been unusual, but it could have happened. But today, with our universal system of records, it's impossible. I've never encountered a parallel case to yours."

"I'm sorry," said Saxon dryly, "but I do seem to have been born, don't I? And somehow escaped the census."

Murdock smiled a wintry smile. "There were funds deposited at the Institute for your education. We haven't been able to trace those funds either. In fact, every way we've turned, we've run into a blank wall."

"I'm sorry," said Saxon again, "but I can't help you. I have absolutely no memory before I was eleven. Don't think it hasn't worried me, I asked the T.I.S. to investigate it years ago. They couldn't find anything then. It's not surprising they haven't found anything this time."

"You won't object to being examined by our N.P.A.?"

"No," replied Saxon.

Villainowski spoke into an inter-communicating audio, "Send in the N.P.A."

The neuro-psychoanalyst must have been waiting outside because he entered immediately. Saxon regarded him curiously. Government's N.P.A. was a lean Cassius-like individual with an ingratiating smile. Saxon had taken an immediate dislike to him when he had first seen him prowling about the corridors of the research building, but he knew the man was a brilliant psychologist.

The N.P.A. approached Saxon rubbing his hands together and smiling. "So this is the subject. How are you, Jon? There's no need to ask questions. I've studied your record. No question but what there's a mental block, is there? Hope we can break it. Sit here, if you don't mind."

Saxon took the chair indicated, the N.P.A. facing him.

"Take one of these." He held out a box of hypno-pills.

Saxon selected one, gulped it down. He made no effort to read the minds of Murdock, Villainowski or the N.P.A.

The neuro-psychoanalyst was wearing a revolving mirror about an inch in diameter on a band about his forehead. He set the mirror in motion which caught the room light, alternately darkening and flashing.

"Look into the light, Jon," he said in a calm, sure voice. "Relax and watch the light. You are going to sleep when I count three. You can feel the effect of the hypno-pill already. When I count three you sleep, sleep... One." A pause. "Two." Pause. "Three..."

AFTER half an hour the N.P.A.'s voice wasn't so sure. He had given Jon three more pills, had tried all the devices at the command of the largest neural-clinic in the Empire without the slightest effect. Jon Saxon continued to regard the N.P.A. with a half hidden gleam of amusement in his dark gray eyes.

The neuro-psychoanalyst sat back, mopped his perspiring face with his handkerchief. "It's no use!" he said in a strained voice. "He can't be hypnotized!"

"I could have told you that," replied Saxon. "Do you think I haven't tried to have the block broken before?"

The N.P.A. swore and got to his feet. "Well, why didn't you say so?" he shouted. It was the first time Saxon had ever seen him lose his temper.

"Because these gentlemen have been suspicious of me." He indicated Murdock and Villainowski. "If I had offered any objections to being hypnotized, they'd have been sure that I was afraid to."

All at once, Saxon experienced the peculiar tingling in scalp and skin that warned him the alien creatures, whom he had met in the street, were present. He couldn't possibly be mistaken. Once having experi-

enced that peculiar inhuman feel it was not to be forgotten or confused.

Not only were they invisible, but neither doors nor walls seemed to offer any resistance to them.

"Who are you?" he concentrated, but his thought met that strange mental barrier. There was no answer.

He realized that the three men were watching him with a curious tenseness.

Suddenly the N.P.A.'s jaw dropped. An expression of complete astonishment lit up his face. "I've got it! I've got it!" he cried.

"Got what?" growled Villainowski, moving uneasily behind his massive desk.

"Saxon! Saxon, that's who! My Lord, why didn't it occur to me before. He's a—"

The words died suddenly on the N.P.A.'s lips. An expression of fright crossed his lean features. Then, without a sound, he crumpled to the carpet.

Jon Saxon, staring in horror, realized that the tingling of his skin was diminishing. The telepaths were withdrawing.

At the same instant Murdock's chair hit the floor as he leaped across the room, dropped to his knee beside the prone figure of the N.P.A. For a moment he was bent over the body like a bronze statue, then he turned his face up to Villainowski.

Saxon, who had read his thoughts, was amazed at Murdock's passionless expression.

"He's dead," the T.I.S. agent said in a toneless voice. "I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it happen, but he's deader than the moon."

IV

BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!
rang the warning gong, reverberating through the launching pit.

Mustapha IX had shaken hands for the last time with Villainowski and hurried down the gangplank. The ports were all sealed; crew at their stations. Outside the pits, the frenzied crowd was delirious with excitement. Wasn't it man's first attempt to reach the stars?

Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong!

On the last stroke the *Shooting Star* fell silent except for the muffled roar of her tubes warming. At the same instant the crowd grew impossibly still.

The raw fear, which had made itself felt in spite of the festivities, rode to the surface. The strange psychological dread of deep space.

A woman in the relatives' stand suddenly buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with violent sobs. She was the wife of the master mechanic on the third's watch. A gray-faced man moved towards the woman, patted her shoulders.

Just then a continuous violent explosion shook the frail stand like an earth tremor. The *Shooting Star* burst from the pits, trailing a comet-tail of orange flame.

"Oh, my husband!" wailed the woman, "oh, my husband!" but her voice was drowned in the roar.

JON SAXON threw off his safety belt, glanced across at the strained white face of Ieth Urban in the next acceleration chair. "Buck up," he grinned. "It's too late to change your mind now."

The girl nervously tucked a curl in place, smiled uncertainly. "Heaven help me! Are we going to share all my thoughts during the rest of the voyage?"

"Hell, no," said Saxon. "I want to preserve some of my illusions." He leaned towards her. "I'll strike a bargain with you, though. If you don't mention that I'm a telepath, I'll not report our—er—experience last night."

"You mean you haven't said anything?"

"No," said Saxon. "Why should I? I didn't have proof. Who'd want to tackle General Atomic without cast-iron evidence? On second thought, who'd want to tackle General Atomic at all? No one would believe me, anyway. Just like they won't believe you if you tell them I'm a telepath."

Saxon could see the girl reach a decision. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," he broke in before she could voice her thought. "You've lots of other courses. You could snub me or spread tales behind my back."

"I didn't say it!" she retorted hotly. "I thought it. My Lord, I can't even call my thoughts my own!"

"Then it's a bargain."

"I didn't say so."

"No. But you've decided to..."

She stamped her feet. "That's what I mean! That's what I mean!"

"Calm down," he said. "Half the staff is staring at you."

Ileth drew a deep breath, shrugged. A grim smile flashed across her pretty patrician features.

"If you can stand it," she replied with an unexpected twinkle in her hazel-green eyes, "I suppose I can too."

He stood up. "Like to meet the rest of the staff? Fine. You're all settled in your cabin, aren't you? No? Then I'll give you a hand as soon as we finish our tour of introduction."

Ileth's eyes had grown darker and darker.

"Now don't lose your temper," he said hastily.

"I haven't said a damn word. At least let me get my answers out of my mouth."

Saxon laughed, taking her arm. "Come along. We're accelerating at one G constant. We'll have no trouble moving around." He hesitated, then asked in an off hand manner, "Has Q62 identified himself yet?"

Ileth looked startled, frightened. She tried to draw away but Saxon held onto her arm. "No. No, he hasn't. Please let go. You're hurting me, Jon."

But he didn't release her. "Is he aboard the ship?"

"No. I don't know. General Atomic didn't notify me that he would be." Abruptly, Ileth didn't seem confused any longer. She raised her chin, looked Saxon nakedly in the eyes making no effort to conceal her thoughts. "I think he is," she said simply. "But I don't know. He hasn't identified himself, if he is. I—I haven't seen anyone aboard that I know. I think I'm the only General Atomic agent aboard, and I'm an accredited representative."

Saxon regarded her a moment without speaking. The girl was telling the truth as far as she knew. There could be no doubt about that.

SAXON introduced Ileth to Brand, Government's bio-chemist, to Mercedes, the gray-haired middle-aged woman who was Government's authority in anthropology. He made the circuit of the lounge with her, letting her chat with ethnologists and semantics experts, psycho-historians and zoologists—all of Government's brilliant array of specialists. And all the while he kept his mind open and alert, sifting their varied thought patterns for a betraying sign.

He didn't intercept a single suspicious thought.

They all seemed to be just exactly what they were supposed to be, each one an expert in his field, eager and enthusiastic investigators beginning an unparalleled adventure. Saxon could discover no evidences that any of them had sold out to General Atomic.

If Q62 or any General Atomic agent were among Government's staff, they were perfect in dissembling their thoughts.

From the lounge, Saxon showed Ileth about the ship. He could see it was an experience for the girl.

The *Shooting Star* had been built along the general design of a cruiser, heavily armed and armored against the possibilities of hostile races inhabiting the planets of the Alpha Centaurian suns.

Her crew was small. Government's staff of scientists numbered fourteen; and only four of the corporations were represented: General Atomic, Tri-World, Amalgamated Plastic and United Spaceways. In spite of the mass of equipment and a year's emergency ration of fuel and supplies, they were not crowded.

Saxon led Ileth through the control room, the officer's mess, the engine room and observation deck. Everywhere they went, Saxon probed the brains of crew and officers.

At the end of two hours, he still had found exactly nothing. Apparently Q62 was not aboard. Ileth asked slyly, "Did you find him?"

They had entered the deck on which the cabins were located and were passing the closed door of number seven.

"Q62?" said Saxon with a puzzled frown, "No—" He halted abruptly, seizing the girl's arm.

"Jon! What is it?"

"Be quiet!"

Saxon's scalp was tingling as if minute electrical shocks were coursing through the roots of his hair.

The Aliens?

The feel was unmistakable to his extra-human sixth sense. And it was emanating from Cabin Seven!

Like a cat he reached the door in one silent bound, pressed the button. The panel slid back noiselessly. Except for a blade of light lancing into the cabin from the

lighted passage, only darkness lurked beyond the doorway.

The alien inhuman feel was suddenly so strong that it was like a cold draft pouring through the blackened entrance, sending chills rippling up his spine.

Ileth's eyes were enormous. Saxon could hear her frightened erratic breathing. Her fear-thoughts beat at his brain. "*What is it? What has he found? What's wrong?*"

In spite of himself, Saxon could feel the blood drain out of his cheeks. He wanted suddenly to slam the door and run blindly down the corridor, away from that strange creature lurking in the dark of Cabin Seven.

He controlled himself, reached noiselessly inside the door, pressed the switch. Light flooded the cabin.

"Why, it's just a girl!" said Ileth, who was peering wide-eyed over Saxon's shoulder. She giggled nervously.

Saxon stared at the occupant of the cabin, scarcely crediting his eyes. It was a girl right enough, a flaxen haired girl sleeping easily on her back in the narrow bunk.

A thin flexoplas coverlet was thrown across her. One slim bare leg dangled over the edge of the bunk. Her face, Saxon saw, was heart shaped, the closed eyelids delicately blue.

At Ileth's giggle, the creature opened her eyes, sat upright with a half-suppressed scream. Ileth backed out of the doorway in embarrassment, but Saxon stood as if turned to stone.

The tingling sensation was sending goose flesh racing over his skin. The alien emanations were streaming straight from the girl on the bunk.

He recovered himself, thought violently, angrily, "*Who are you?*"

The girl stared at him without making a sound. Saxon realized that her eyes were amber as topaz, large and strangely lambent. Then a faint smile twitched the corners of her lips. She made no move to escape, not even to cover her breasts and shoulder.

"*You!*" the thought reached Saxon tinged with amusement. "*It would be you who discovered me!*"

She touched a tiny instrument strapped to her wrist, which Saxon noticed for the first time.

"*Who are you?*" he thought again, then

narrowed his eyes with crazed disbelief.

He could see the bulkhead through the girl. She gave a low laugh. The flexoplas coverlet, which had lain so lightly over her lap, collapsed slowly.

The girl was gone, dissolved. Only her throaty laugh lingered in the still air.

Saxon rubbed his eyes. He felt Ileth trembling against him as if she had a chill. Setting his jaw, he stepped up to the bunk, felt the sheets. They were warm and still held the impression of the girl's body.

He straightened, realized that the tingling in his scalp had ceased. The alien telepath was gone. But where?

"Let's get the hell out of here," Ileth said vehemently.

Saxon followed her into the passage, switched off the lights, closed the door softly behind him.

"I don't believe it!" said Ileth. "I don't want to believe it." Her fine patrician features were paper white, making her black lashes and eyebrows stand out like heavy strokes of a crayon. Her lips were bloodless.

Saxon shook his head in bewilderment. "Couldn't you read her mind?" asked Ileth.

"She had the most perfect mental barrier I've ever encountered. I couldn't read a thing. Only..."

"Only what?"

"Nothing," he said abruptly, shaking his massive shoulders as if to free them from a burden. "Nothing. I think we'd better keep our mouths shut about this too. If we went around telling what we've seen, they'd throw us in the psychopathic ward."

Ileth shuddered.

"Maybe it was an hallucination," she suggested. "Maybe we're nutty as a fruit cake, I hope."

V

YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH THE Little Death before," said Saxon. He and Murdock, the T.I.S. agent, were in the control room, Murdock's eye glued to the scanner. "What's it like, Murdock?"

The gaunt, frosty T.I.S. agent took his eyes from the scanner, faced Saxon.

"Not so bad," he replied laconically.

"I've heard it's a pretty rugged experience."

Murdock allowed himself a tight smile. "That depends on how active a social consciousness you have. You're a non-Newtonian physicist. You know the Pachner conception of the space-time continuum better than I do. Villainowski's stellar drive inverts the Newtonian concept that a vehicle travels through space during a passage of time. It operates through time during a passage of space.

"Yes, yes," Saxon interrupted impatiently. "But the effects of the time field... What do you experience while the ship is in the time field?"

"That's the Little Death," replied Murdock in a dry voice, "though the name is misleading. Actually you experience a segment of your own life, either the past, the future, or the present. As Villainowski would explain it, time is co-existent, while in the time field our lives are spread out around us, but because we're equipped with three dimensional sense organs we're restricted to a single series of episodes anywhere along our life span."

Saxon frowned and said, "In other words, it's just as if we returned to the past and relived some incident that occurred to us before?"

"Right. Or into the future and experienced something that hasn't happened yet."

Saxon's frown deepened. "But what's so rugged about that?"

"Nothing," rejoined Murdock dryly, "if you've lived an exemplary life. It's not pleasant, though, to live over and over again a period when you committed murder say, or were terribly frightened, or even did some little thing that you've been trying your best to forget since."

Saxon caught a brief mental flash from the T.I.S. agent, as he shoved the picture of a girl with pretty Slavic features out of his mind.

"I'm not looking forward to the Little Death!" Murdock said dryly, and returned his eye to the scanner.

Saxon leaned back in the acceleration chair. The captain was bending over the three-dimensional space-charts along with the third mate. A spaceman stood at the robot pilot. Another, whom Murdock had replaced at the scanner, was reclining in a second acceleration chair.

There was an air of tension in the control room. Saxon realized suddenly that the

captain was checking the robot controls.

That could mean only one thing. It was hearing time for Villainowski to switch the *Shooting Star* onto the stellar drive. They would be going into the Little Death any moment. Saxon sat up abruptly. "How long before we switch over, Captain?"

The captain looked up from the charts. "We've attained minimum velocity. Villainowski's in the engine room now. I'm expecting orders to turn her over right away."

Murdock turned from the scanner again, fixed Saxon with his pale blue eyes.

"By the way, Jon, you've been prowling the ship from stem to stern the past three days." His voice was pitched too low to reach the officers checking the star maps and robot controls. "Have you a line on Q62 yet?"

Saxon could read suspicion in the T.I.S. agent's mind. "No," he admitted, "and I'm more puzzled than you. Ieth doesn't know who Q62 is, or even if he's aboard, although she's been commanded by General Atomic to take her orders from him."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it."

There was a pause, each man busy with his own thoughts.

"I'd swear," Saxon broke the silence, "that Q62 isn't aboard, nor any other General Atomic agents."

Murdock regarded him speculatively and Saxon caught his thought, "*What the hell makes him so damned sure?*"

SURE? Saxon thought to himself. He wasn't sure about anything. The alien stowaway was still aboard. His sixth sense had warned him of her nearness a hundred times during his sporadic jaunts about the ship. But he had been unable to establish contact with her.

He had kept his mind open to the wash of thoughts from crew and staff, but, so far as he had been able to learn, they were all loyal to Government. Not even in their secret innermost thoughts had he discovered any evidence that a traitor was aboard.

Murdock interrupted his reflections, asking, "Have you any idea what that N.P.A. had discovered before he died?"

Saxon started, looked at the T.I.S. agent uncomfortably. Murdock's irrelevant question had conjured a vivid picture in his

mind of the death of the N.P.A. in Villainowski's office.

"I don't know," he said miserably, beginning to understand how uncomfortable the Little Death might be. "I would give a lot to know. He may have had a clue to what I am."

Murdock's cold blue eyes narrowed, and he regarded Saxon with a peculiar intensity. "*That's a devilish odd way for him to put it,*" the T.I.S. agent was thinking. "*What he is! Now why the hell would he say that?*"

Saxon realized with chagrin that he had made a slip. He should have said, "Who I am," not "What I am." No human ever doubted that he was a genuine specimen of *homo sapiens*.

The engine room telegraph buzzed suddenly, and when the captain answered, Villainowski's voice reached the two men.

"Sound the general alarm, Captain. Turn the ship over to the robot control. We're going into the Little Death."

"Right," said the captain. He looked pale and worn and older. He snapped off the telegraph, turned to the third. "Sound the general alarm and turn on the public address system, then go to your cabin." The third nodded, reached for the switch.

An ugly clangor broke through the *Shooting Star* from stem to stern, followed immediately by a harsh metallic voice issuing from strategically placed audios.

"All officers, members of unlicensed personnel and staff report to your quarters at once and lie on your bunks."

There was a series of clicks as the ship went smoothly over to the robot controls.

The command ordering everyone to their cabins was repeated three more times.

Saxon realized there was no one in the control room, but himself, Murdock, and the captain.

"Coming?" asked the captain from the doorway.

"In a minute," Murdock replied.

The captain departed hastily, and Saxon followed the T.I.S. agent across the deck to the control board, where a single dial was marked off in parsecs.

"I'm damned curious about this four dimensional drive," Murdock confessed, as he dropped into an acceleration chair before the dial. "I've been through it before. But I'd like to follow its operation here in

the control room as long as possible before we blank out. Are you game?"

"Sure," Saxon's voice was eager. He took a seat beside Murdock, staring at the dial marked off in parsecs with fascination.

He became conscious of a sobering silence. The robot controls had cut off the jets. A giddy feeling of weightlessness possessed him.

Suddenly the radiograph began to click off a message. He saw Murdock frown, tear off the tape, read it.

"Good Lord!" the T.I.S. agent burst out. "Read it! We've got to get to Villainowski before we go onto the stellar drive!" He leaped to his feet, went soaring in the air, a pained expression on his face. Murdock had forgotten their weightless condition now that the jets were off.

Saxon who had snatched the strip of paper, flashed his eye over the words.

IMPERIAL HEADQUARTERS:

TO CHIEF J. VILLAINOWSKI. URGENT. ORDERS CANCELLED. TURN BACK TO EARTH WITHOUT DELAY. ALL FIVE COPIES OF STELLAR DRIVE STOLEN. GOVERNMENT CANNOT RISK YOUR LIFE IN DEEP SPACE UNTIL YOU CAN REPLACE PLANS.

MUSTAPHA IX.

Saxon realized the machine was still clicking off the message over and over again.

Murdock had pushed himself to the bulkhead, where he kicked off, gliding through the door. Saxon followed cautiously, conscious of a yellow mist collecting in the control room.

The T.I.S. agent got just beyond the doorway when he floated unconscious to the deck.

Saxon made it to the head of the ladder. Then he, too, lost control over his muscles.

The mist was like soup, thick yellow pea soup.

His last conscious thought was, "So this is the Little Death!"

HERE! Why are you crying?" asked the big white giant. His voice was gentle, compassionate, and he was naked except for a kilt of a strange gleaming material like woven light.

"But I don't want to go," Saxon pro-

tested in a reedy, childish tone. He realized in dismay that the giant wasn't a giant at all, but normal and man-sized. "I don't want to go," he heard himself tearfully repeating.

They were in a room, the little boy that had been Saxon and the big white man, and a door across the room was opening. The little boy that was Saxon shrank against the man.

A woman appeared in the doorway. She was tall and beautiful and dressed like the man in a gleaming kilt. She smiled at Saxon, but he was not reassured. He hung back from crossing the threshold.

Saxon saw a troubled look pass between the two. Then the man steeled himself, picked up the squirming boy, carried him through the doorway.

It was a strange sensation that possessed the mature Saxon, stretched on the cold deck at the head of the ladder to the engine room. He wasn't dreaming. He was the little boy, and yet he seemed to be outside himself, watching his own actions, appraising himself like the detached half of a dual personality.

He was in the time field, Saxon realized. That was it! He was reliving a segment of his life span that had taken place before he was eleven!

His heart leaped spasmodically. At last the curtain was being raised on those blank years of childhood!

The room into which the man carried him, Saxon saw, was larger than the anteroom and cluttered with strange machinery, ugly machinery. The far wall was a solid bank of windows, through which he could see a green meadow rolling gently away to blue foothills in the distance. Light poured through the windows from a blazing sun high overhead and a second orange sun was just rising.

The man deposited him in a chair. Saxon quit thrashing, as the woman fitted a skull-cap over his head, making minute adjustments. A cable led from the peak of the skull-cap to a frightening machine which the woman bent over next, and set in operation.

Saxon could feel a rush of thought pouring into his brain. Queer thoughts couched in semantically obscure words.

One stood out. "*Earth*." It was repeated many times before he began to comprehend

the import of the alien symbols. "*Earth is the third planet of a star known to its inhabitants as Sol!*"

With a feeling of strangeness the Saxon who observed realized that the boy was being taught to speak English!

SAXON shook his head groggily, pushed himself to his hands and knees and found himself floating six feet in the air. He had forgotten that the jet drive was still off.

It came back with a suddenness that flung Saxon to the metal deck.

He scrambled to his feet, his mind in a whirl. Forgotten temporarily were the emergency orders commanding them to return to Earth. If Villainowski had been right, then Saxon had actually relived an event which had transpired before he was eleven.

Then who the hell was he?

He returned to the control room, stepping over the unconscious body of Murdock, who had not yet recovered from the effects of the time field.

The dial on the control board read 1.3 parsecs!

He jumped for the scanner, clamped his eye to the aperture, and immediately jumped back!

Dead ahead was a huge blazing sun!

It looked so close that the *Shooting Star* appeared to be falling straight into the maw of erupting atomic energy.

But reason returned, and he knew they must still be millions of miles away. He went back to the scanner, spotting first a second sun not so close, then a third, small and red like a fiery coin.

The ternary system of Alpha Centauri! They were out of the Solar System!

"Please," said a girl's voice behind him. "Stand back from the scanner! Don't try for your gun, Saxon, or I will be forced to shoot!"

Saxon whirled around.

Ileth Urban stood in the doorway, a dart gun leveled at his stomach. Behind her, he saw the shame-faced Murdock surrounded by the crew. Murdock was helpless, his arms in the air.

"The crew have mutinied," said Ileth. "The ship is now under the control of General Atomic."

Saxon's jaw sagged. He said, "So you

are Q62" It wasn't so much a question as a statement. He knew. He could read it in her thoughts. But why hadn't he been able to see it there before?

It wasn't possible, but there could be no doubt. Ileth Urban was Q62.

Then the thoughts of the men in the corridor made themselves felt. Every man jack of them had gone over to General Atomic, not recently, but weeks and months ago, before they had ever left Earth.

He dropped into a chair, his head in his hands. How had they been able to disguise their thoughts all this time?

He looked at Ileth in her chartreuse green short-waisted jacket. She held the dart gun leveled at his chest. Her patrician features were set in grim unhappy lines.

"Something!" Saxon thought wildly, "Something has gone terribly wrong!"

VI

THE T.I.S. AGENT, HIS BONY fingers locked beneath his head, was stretched face up on his bunk. There were five of them in the ship's brig—Saxon, Murdock and Villainowski, Mercedes, the anthropologist and Brand, the bio-chemist.

"Jon, that girl's crazy about you."

"What?" Jon Saxon swung up his head, regarded Murdock coldly.

Without moving, the T.I.S. agent repeated, "She's in love with you, Jon. Though what Ileth can find to love in that ugly granite mug of yours is beyond comprehension."

Saxon said, "So what?" Everyone was watching him speculatively.

They had been cooped together for nine days now, the four men and the woman. Yesterday the ship had landed. But none of them knew where.

"So what?" Murdock echoed breaking the silence. "My Lord, man, play up to her. She's eating her heart out for you. Can't you see it's our only chance?"

"No," said Saxon stiffly and blocked out their thoughts. "No, I don't. You know as well as I do, that the crew and the officers, even the staff, except Mercedes and Brand here sold out to General Atomic. Suppose I did persuade Ileth to let us out. Suppose she comes over to our side—which I tell you right now she won't—but suppose she did. What possible chance would the five

of us have against sixty armed desperate men and women? Hell, Murdock, we couldn't even get the ship back to Earth by ourselves!" He hesitated. "Besides it strikes me as a contemptible stunt..."

Murdock's cold blue eyes flashed. He sat up, swinging his feet to the deck. "Do you think we're playing a game?"

Mercedes, the gray-haired woman, interrupted, "Don't nag him, Murdock. Everyone isn't a cold-blooded monster like you."

The T.I.S. agent grunted his disgust, lay back down and rolled to his stomach.

Mercedes was a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman with bright black eyes like a parrot.

"I don't see yet," she continued imperturbably, "how General Atomic could contact everyone before we sailed." She smoothed her skirts, sitting primly on the brig's only chair, and cast a sly look at Murdock. "Not with the vaunted T.I.S. on guard."

"Humph!" came Murdock's muffled voice from the pillow. "What's so damned impossible about that? We couldn't watch the beggars all the time." He rolled back and sat up again.

"No. What bothers me is why they didn't give themselves away. They were investigated. All of them were reputable Government men, their fathers Government men before 'em."

"It's hard to refuse a million credits," Saxon pointed out.

Murdock's pale blue eyes jerked to Saxon. "How do you know?"

Before Saxon could reply, Mercedes said, "General Atomic offered us all a million credits. They did to me and Brand, I know. We reported it to the T.I.S."

"Yeah," said Murdock with a frown. "Yeah, and we questioned them with the lie-detector. Not once, but everytime they left the building. They were psychoanalyzed and searched. And every damned one of them was certified loyal to Government. They never gave a sign that they'd sold out to General Atomic, not a sign. Why, the bums acted as if they didn't know it themselves."

"They didn't!" put in Saxon.

Their eyes swung back to the burly nuclear physicist. He read scepticism, doubt, curiosity in their minds.

"What do you mean??" Murdock exploded.

"I mean just what I said. They actually didn't know that they had sold out to General Atomic until after the Little Death. It's simple enough. I'm surprised no one's thought of it before. Ever since Charcot back in the nineteenth century..."

"Hypnotism!" Villainowski burst out. "That's it, of course! Post-hypnotic commands!"

Saxon nodded. "I wasn't sure. I'm not sure even yet." But he was. He had known it the moment he had looked into Ileth's mind the day of the mutiny.

Murdock frowned, said "Post-hypnotic commands? I don't follow you."

"There's nothing mysterious about it, actually," explained Saxon. "When the men sold out to General Atomic they must have submitted to being hypnotized by GA's neuro-psychoanalyst. They could be given orders while in the hypnotic state, then commanded to forget them, forget in fact that they had sold out to General Atomic until after the Little Death. The Little Death was to act as a post-hypnotic command, recalling their memories and instructions."

"By Pluto!" ejaculated Murdock. "I believe you've hit it!" He regarded Saxon with increased respect.

The slight, homely Villainowski rubbed a nine day's growth of beard, musing, "It was a beautiful scheme. Then men couldn't betray themselves. They couldn't be tripped up by the lie-detector because they honestly believed they were still loyal to Government."

Again Saxon nodded. "I was trying to find Q62," he said, "when Ileth was Q62 all the time, although she didn't know it until she woke up from the Little Death."

BRAND, the bio-chemist, who had been lying on an upper bunk silently listening, broke into the conversation. "But why did General Atomic wait until after the Little Death before having their men seize the ship? It doesn't make sense. I should think they'd want to get the drive to one of their laboratories, where it could be examined as soon as possible."

It was Murdock who replied. "That's not difficult to explain either. General Atomic couldn't afford to take a chance.

If they'd grabbed the *Shooting Star* within reach of Government's space navy, they would have been apprehended sure. Remember, every observatory in the System had us in view until we went into the time field.

"No one but Villainowski knows how to use the stellar drive, so they couldn't have used that to escape. But after we reached Alpha Centauri we were beyond reach of the electronic telescope on Luna, even beyond radio contact. Their engineers would have a chance to examine the drive and learn enough to operate it, at least. They could return then. Nothing can catch the *Shooting Star* when she's operating in the Little Death."

Saxon listened with somber eyes to the T.I.S. agent's explanation. It was right, he felt, as far as it went. But it didn't account for the aliens, nor for Saxon's strange experiences during the Little Death, nor the death of that N.P.A. before they sailed.

He heard the door to the brig click and glanced up just as it slid aside.

Ileth Urban stood in the entrance.

Ileth's green jodphur-like trousers emphasized her long legs and slim waist. Her black shoulder length hair had been pushed back, disclosing small peaked ears.

She came inside, with a look of determination, and the guard closed the door behind her, but didn't lock it.

"I..." she began, caught Saxon's eyes and blushed furiously. Unconsciously her chin went up and she squared her shoulders. "I don't know how to say what I've come to tell you." Again she hesitated, biting her lip. "I think it'll be good news..."

"Good news?" echoed Murdock sarcastically. "Have the crew been massacred by Centaureans?"

"There's no sign of living Centaureans yet," she replied. "Not on this planet anyway."

"Living Centaureans?" asked Murdock. "What do you mean 'living' Centaureans? What have you found?"

The silence was alive. Saxon could feel the intangible fear of deep space grip every one of them. There was, he realized, a decided pathologic quality about it, as if every one of them were not quite sane on the subject.

"A city," said Ileth is a suppressed voice. There was a quick intake of breaths.

"Yes," she went on, "a city. About twenty-five kilometers northeast of here. A perfectly huge city without a single inhabitant."

"What planet is this?" Villainowski asked suddenly.

"There's no harm in telling you, I suppose," said Ileth. "because we haven't the faintest notion. Our astronomer says that it belongs to Alpha Centauri A, although he hasn't figured its period yet. He says it's about midway between Alpha Centauri A and Alpha Centauri B. It's a little larger than Earth but not so dense. Gravity is about four fifths what it is at home." Her face sobered at the word "home." "Oxygen content a little high, but not much. The rest of the atmosphere is composed principally of non-poisonous inert gases. Now you know as much as we do."

Jon Saxon became aware of a thought emanating from Murdock: "*Seize the girl. Dictate terms to the others.*" The same thought, Saxon realized, was forming in their bio-chemist's mind as well.

Ileth must have suspected something, because her hand crept up to her small high breasts and she said, "Before I go on, you'd better know that I'm not so unprotected as I look. We were all hypnotized back on Earth and our orders given to us in that condition. Then we were commanded to forget them until after the Little Death. I'm telling you this so you'll understand."

The prisoners exchanged glances.

"General Atomic," Ileth continued hurriedly, "prepared for any eventuality. If anything happens to me, Q63 will take over. I don't know who he is, and he doesn't know it himself, but any accident befalling me will be the post-hypnotic signal for him to remember. There's also a Q64, Q65—all the way to Q70. So you see it's useless to think that by doing anything to me you can get the upper hand."

"Rather like queen bees," suggested Saxon. "Secret order with a vengeance."

"*Even from you, darling!*" he caught Ileth's irritating thought.

HE SAW Murdock relax on his bunk, intercepted his furious frustration. The T.I.S. agent, he realized, was like cold flame on the inside.

"But that's not my news," Ileth said. "I've come to offer you your freedom—within limits, of course."

"Eh?" said Villainowski in surprise, and the rest tensed expectantly.

Ileth said, "General Atomic believed that it would be to their advantage to go ahead with the expedition as soon as we got control of the ship. We would be on the spot, and any information relating to Alpha Centauri's planetary systems, natural resources, inhabitants (if any), possibilities of colonization and trade—that sort of thing—is of the utmost importance.

I feel..." She hesitated, and Saxon caught a glimpse again of that same intolerable fear gnawing at her mind.

"I feel that we should stick together—while we're here at least. If we're fighting among ourselves. . ."

"In other words," Murdock interrupted in a voice without inflection, "you're asking us to go on with the expedition as if nothing's happened?"

"Only while we're here," she hastened to assure him. "You won't be given arms, of course. There are only five of you. What earthly chance would you have against the entire crew and the rest of the staff? And this way you won't have to stay locked in the brig. You can carry on with your investigations. We—we don't know what alien form of life inhabits this planet. But the city. . ."

She bit her lip again. "The city was peculiar."

A short uncomfortable silence greeted her statement; then Mercedes, the gray-haired anthropologist asked, "What do you mean, child?"

"I don't know how to define it. Wait until you see it."

But Saxon had intercepted an image in Ileth's mind—a distorted glimpse of a vast beautiful city stretching for kilometer after kilometer without a soul anywhere. A sobering chill prickled up his spine. He said, "I, for my part, am willing to call a truce, Ileth."

The girl glanced at him gratefully. Saxon became aware of a passionate thought: "*Oh, the darling stiffnecked bear!*" The girl's color heightened suddenly. She began to think furiously: "*To times two is four; three times two is six; four times two is eight. . .*"

Saxon grinned at her knowingly, to her added confusion.

"I hate you!" she thought

Villainowski jumped to his feet, saying, "Of course we accept. We all accept. But let me warn you, young woman, aliens or no aliens, I don't care if we spend the rest of our lives in the Centaurian system, I'm not going to explain my stellar drive to your scoundrels!"

Ileth turned to him almost gratefully. "Oh, that doesn't matter. Our engineers are examining it. They've assured me that they can take us back to Earth."

Villainowski looked crestfallen.

"Tomorrow," said Ileth in a firm voice, "we're starting to investigate the city. Mercedes is the anthropologist. I particularly wanted her and Saxon along."

"What about the rest of us?" Brand the bio-chemist, asked.

Ileth ticked them off on her fingers. "Dr. Villainowski is an astro-physicist, I believe. We have the telescope mounted. He and our men are to locate any other planets in the system. You, Dr. Brand, are to go with Loar, the Martian, on an expedition into the hills to the south. Mr. Murdock will be stationed temporarily with the emergency crew aboard the *Shooting Star*."

Saxon realized that she had cleverly separated them. At the same moment he recognized that leap of fear in Ileth whenever she thought about outside. It was pathologic.

"My Lord!" he thought, "was their fear of deep space driving them insane?"

Ileth was saying, "You can have your old cabins back. I won't see you again until tomorrow. We—we're still on Earth time because of the peculiar daylight hours. Until tomorrow."

She turned, head bent and hurried abruptly through the door.

The prisoners looked at each other in vague alarm, unconsciously drawing closer together. In each of their minds, Saxon read the same thing—the blind unspoken terror of deep space!

THE helicopter whispered scarcely a hundred feet above the rolling plain, while Saxon stared hungrily out of the windows, unable to satisfy his eyes.

Alpha Centauri A, a scintillating yellow orb like Sol, stood in mid-sky. The orange

disc that was Alpha Centauri B, the second half of the binary, was just rising. Proxima was not in sight.

Directly below he could see a flock of plants that looked like tumble weeds except that they were a weirdly mottled yellow and green. They rolled along in a herd pausing to nibble at new shoots of the pale green grass. "Cannibal Plants," their botanist had named them because of their feeding habits.

Herbivorous plants!

Their botanist, Saxon thought, was going quietly insane trying to classify the staggering complexity of utterly alien forms of plant growth.

"Weird, isn't it?" A woman's rich husky voice addressed Saxon. "It sends goose flesh up my spine." Saxon tore his eyes away from the window.

The person sitting beside him was Clo-Javel, a black-eyed woman with cadmium-yellow hair. There was a sleek disturbing fullness to her breasts and hips that was echoed in her red lips and magnificent eyes. She must be thirty-five but no one except possibly the T.I.S. knew her exact age.

Clo-Javel's first passion was archaeology, Saxon knew. Her second was men. He asked, "How many pieces of silver did General Atomic give you?"

Clo-Javel regarded him with an amused tolerant smile. "Don't be rude, Jon."

Saxon, looking into the woman's mind, realized that his thrust hadn't disturbed her in the least. Clo-Javel apparently had no more honor than morals.

There was no question, though, about her archaeological ability. Her reconstruction of the New York skyscrapers, which had perished early in the Atom Age, were famous.

Saxon was appalled. He had expected to uncover a sense of shame among the crew and staff for their treachery. But, if they felt any remorse, they never let it rise into the realms of conscious thought. He had probed their minds one after another, his hope of persuading some of them to return to the Government fold diminished with each one.

At one stroke they had received wealth and better positions with General Atomic's research bureau. They were determined not to lose them. Furthermore, to a man

they were convinced that General Atomic would be the next government.

He glanced about the cabin. There were nine of them accompanying Ileth to the deserted city. He allowed their thoughts to wash across his mind, eager, excited, fearful thoughts like half spoken words.

"Look!" Ileth cried suddenly and pointed ahead. She was piloting the helicopter and spoke over her shoulder. "Look! There's the city!"

Saxon saw a maze of towers scintillating like jewels in the combined light of the twin suns. He saw endless avenues and squares and parks. It was all bright and raw like a city seen in a shimmering mirage.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. He felt... Why, damn it, he felt as if he were coming home after a long time.

Home?

He thought suddenly of his extra-human senses. Maybe this *was* home! Could it be that he was not of Earth at all? Not a mutant of whom his parents had been ashamed and who had deserted him at the Institute, as he had always believed?

Then Ileth was dropping the helicopter safely into a beautiful square ringed with vari-colored translucent buildings.

Nothing moved. Not the faintest echo of a sound reached Saxon's ears. He found himself holding his breath as the 'copter landed with a faint jar.

Saxon's scalp began to prickle warningly, and such a feel of alienism swept over him, exciting his extra-human sixth sense that he felt giddy.

The city wasn't deserted. It was densely populated.

All around him, everywhere, were aliens. He could sense their movements along the streets, inside the buildings. Hundreds of them.

He heard Ileth's strangely chastened voice. "It's so uncannily deserted. No one. Absolutely no one. What do you suppose happened to the—the things who built this city?"

Saxon had to clench his jaw to keep from shouting, "They're here! You fools, let's get away while we've still got a chance! They're all around us!"

Instead, he kept silent, little beads of perspiration breaking through his prickling skin.

JON SAXON WAS THE FIRST man out of the helicopter. He stood stock-still while the others climbed out, his scalp tingling, his eyes sweeping the magnificent panorama. The faces of buildings like the sheer fracture of tinted ice walled in the square, with here and there a canyon street slicing off from it.

Ileth scrambled out last, asked, "Jon, what's wrong? You're pale as a ghost."

"I don't know." The tingling in his hair roots was becoming less pronounced as his extra-human sixth sense adjusted. He was still aware of the aliens but not uncomfortably so.

"You—you don't feel anything?"

He started. "How did you know I could feel things?"

"I didn't!" Ileth's hazel-green eyes were enormous. "Good Lord, Jon, I only thought you could sense their thoughts, maybe, if anything was around. I didn't... Can you feel things? You can, can't you? I should have guessed it."

Saxon's expression had grown grimmer with each word. When Ileth asked, "What are you?" in a hushed voice, he snapped,

"Homo Superior!"

"Homo Superior?" She looked startled, then raised her eyebrows. "You don't fancy yourself much, do you?"

They had drawn gradually away from the others. He looked back. Basil, the geographer, and his helper had set up their instruments. They were taking readings, making swift notations. They had the three dimensional camera recording impressions, and the automatic mapper was beginning to scratch a few tentative lines on its plastic rolls.

"I think we ought to stick together," Saxon volunteered. "I know it'll be impossible to keep the geographers by us, but the rest had better hang together."

Ileth shivered and asked, "Then there is something here?"

The silence was absolute. Not a breath of air stirred anywhere. Saxon hesitated, said at last, "Yes, I think so."

"What?"

"I don't know."

Clo-Javel, approached them, straightening her short kilt-like skirts. The archaeologist's costume was brief and practical,

but of more importance to Clo-Javel's way of thinking, the red skirt disclosed a goodly length of her really remarkable legs. Clo-Javel was even more proud of her legs than of her reconstruction of the New York skyscrapers. She said, "Did you ever see such buildings? What makes them look so weird?"

Saxon wrinkled his brow, his eyes returning to the glittering facade of cliff-like structures as they waited for the rest of their party to come up.

"I think," he said hesitantly, "it's because, it's because everything looks so new. As if the city was only finished yesterday and had never been used."

"That's it," Ileth burst out.

Mercedes joined them. She too, was wearing kilts, but hers were longer than Clo-Javel's and gray and her jacket was a commodious affair with many pockets. "What's that?" she asked catching the tail end of the conversation.

"The city looks as if it has never been lived in," Ileth explained.

Mercedes lit a cigarette, said, "Nonsense, whoever heard of building a city and then not using it."

"No." Clo-Javel agreed with the gray haired Mercedes. "It's not that altogether. Possibly it's built of some material impervious to decay. Saxon's a physicist." She gave him a brilliant smile. "He would know more about that than I do."

Clo-Javel pursed red lips. "It—it looks familiar."

There was a silence, then Mercedes said, "So it does. Though I can't put my finger on it. But that shouldn't be so strange. The creatures who built it might have been very similar to us. If I could lay my hands on some of their bones..." She laughed good humoredly. "I could tell you in a minute what they were like."

"Were?" Saxon thought, but he didn't express it aloud. He was conscious all the time of the presence of the aliens. It was like being in the midst of a crowded city street.

The semantics expert, the psycho-historian, and the ethnologist joined them in a body. They headed for the nearest building, a towering windowless structure of yellow crystal.

Saxon glanced back uneasily.

The helicopter stood silent and deserted

in the center of the square. The geographer and his helper were disappearing down one of the canyon-like streets with their equipment.

"Look!" commanded Ileth pointing toward the face of the yellow structure. "Letters of some sort! There on the building. Maybe it's a sign."

They quickened their pace until they could describe the letters clearly.

Ileth gasped, "Oh!" and stopped uncertainly.

The rest of them came to a confused halt beside her, staring up at the sign in utter bewilderment. Saxon felt a chill creep up his spine. The sign read:

TIMES SQUARE

FOR as long as it takes to draw a startled breath there was silence; then they all began to babble at once. Clo-Javel made herself heard suddenly above the others. "I recognize it!" she cried in her ringing husky voice.

"What?"

"It's an exact reproduction of New York II! I knew the city looked familiar! I knew it!"

"New York II?" Saxon echoed. He was not strong in history and had only a faint recollection of a city by that name having once occupied the great Manhattan waste lands.

"Yes," Clo-Javel repeated, "It was the world capitol before Adirondaka was built. I had to study it when I was doing the reconstruction of New York I. There's a scale model of it in the Institute's museum. Isn't that right, Rufus?"

The psycho-historian nodded in a bemused fashion.

"Yes," he agreed. "New York II was built over the ruins of New York I which had been destroyed by the first atomic war. The second atomic war completely annihilated New York II as well as all the other big cities on Earth. Cities weren't built after that for almost five hundred years. Not until the Empire, in fact." He paused uncertainly. "I don't understand this."

Ileth asked, "You mean that this city is an exact reproduction of New York II, Clo?"

The woman nodded, her black eyes curiously frightened. "This is the amusement

center. The yellow building housed the Tri-World Theatre."

"But I don't understand..." Ileth gazed helplessly at Saxon. "What is a reproduction of New York II doing here on a planet in the Alpha Centaurian system? We're over four light years from Sol. No one's ever been here before."

Saxon was conscious of bewilderment and fear muddling the girl's thoughts. His own mind couldn't quite grasp the fact that here was an exact replica of a Terran city. It was inexplicable. It didn't make sense. And, more than that, it was impossible!

He could read the same thoughts struggling against the fact in the minds of the others. He said, "Let's see what the buildings are like inside."

"Yes," agreed Ileth. She had edged close to Saxon. "Maybe we can find the answer inside."

They started for the impressive entrance of the Tri-World Theatre, halted again in near-panic as the doors swung wide.

Ileth gasped, clutched at Saxon's arm, hanging onto it in desperation.

Before any of them could say anything, a voice blared forth. "...a thousand Ganymedian natives in the primitive ritualistic orgy of that Weird little satellite. Hamura in the mating dance of the Ganymedians. Seats: three hundred and seventy-five dollars."

Clo-Javel's voice had lost its rich huskiness. It was a frightened quaver when she said, "It's a working model. Automatic, don't you see?" She giggled nervously, and paused.

"But the voice?" protested Ileth.

"Advertising," explained the archaeologist. "It's a mechanical voice, like the doors."

"Well, I'm not sure how much a dollar was," said Mercedes, "but three hundred and seventy-five for a seat seems rather exorbitant."

Rufus, the psycho-historian, was pale as a corpse. He swallowed, managed to splutter, "Inflation that followed the first atomic war. Inflation..." His voice trailed off as he stared beyond the gaping doors into the foyer of the empty theatre.

"Well, I'm not going in that place!" said the ethnologist suddenly. He was a goat-bearded little dandy. It was his first speech in some time.

Rufus, the psycho-historian, said, "I don't think I care to either."

"Nonsense!" exploded Mercedes. "There isn't anything in there. You can see for yourself. I'm going in."

"I think we should explore the city a bit further," Rufus protested. He glanced uneasily toward the helicopter. Basil and his helper were nowhere in sight.

Mercedes said, "Humph," gave her plump shoulders a shake, disappeared with short sturdy steps through the door.

"She shouldn't go in there alone," said Saxon starting after her. Ileth clung to his arm. "I'm coming along." They left the others standing huddled outside, watching them nervously.

THE foyer was carpeted ankle deep in mauve. Life-like, three-dimensional photographs of actors and actresses in every conceivable costume from none at all to the cumbersome furs of Titan lined the walls.

The magnificent foyer gave the startling impression that just the moment before, crowds of theatre goers had been surging across it. Saxon could feel the hair lift on the back of his neck.

"Where's Mercedes?" asked Ileth in a small voice.

Saxon glanced around, realized that the anthropologist wasn't in the foyer. "She must have gone into the theatre." He lifted his voice, called, "Mercedes. Mercedes!"

His voice echoed hollowly. There was no answer. Saxon and Ileth exchanged worried glances.

"Our voices probably don't carry beyond the foyer," Saxon reassured the girl. "The ancients were clever with sound."

They crossed the floor, their steps cushioned noiselessly in the thick mauve carpet. They went through the doors, past the automatic ticket taker and paused.

A vast amphitheatre with curving rows of empty seats fell away below them like the terribly ancient Roman theatre at Pompeii. The walls by some trick of construction trapped the light, shedding it softly over the seats, concentrating it in a glowing pillar of illumination on the stage.

Suddenly, Ileth brought her hand to her mouth, a look of horror springing into her features. "Oh, my Lord!" she whispered. "Look!" and pointed at the floor at their

feet. Saxon glanced down, caught his breath.

A puddle of clothes lay on the floor as if the middle aged, gray-haired anthropologist had just stepped out of them.

Saxon dropped to his knees beside the garments, turned them over. Sturdy leather walking shoes and heavy gray socks. Gray skirt and jacket. A stout brassiere and practical mannish shorts. They were so typically Mercedes, that Saxon felt a lump in his throat.

The socks were still in the shoes, brassiere inside the jacket. He stood up, feeling his palms begin to sweat. It was as if Mercedes had been suddenly dissipated into thin air, her clothes falling in on themselves.

He heard Ileth give a dry sob, realized suddenly that he felt no alien presence. He and the girl were alone in the theatre, alone as they'd been in the street that night in Adirondaka.

Saxon clenched his fist. "Let's get out of here. Quick!"

"But Mercedes?"

"She's gone! We can't help Mercedes now. The others! Hurry!"

They ran through the doorway back across the carpeted foyer, halting at the street.

Four little mounds of clothes met their eyes.

Saxon could feel his stomach knot inside himself. He felt the clothes. They were still warm from contact with the men's bodies. He stirred the brief red kilt that Clo-Javel had been wearing, saw with a macabre flash of humor that where Mercedes' underthings had been eminently practical, Clo-Javel didn't wear any at all.

Ileth suppressed a scream. "The helicopter! Look! It's gone, too!" Saxon glanced up in consternation.

The square was empty. The twin suns riding high in the sky beat down on bare plastic blocks where the helicopter had stood.

"We're hiking back to the ship—now," Saxon said to the frightened girl.

"But it's twenty-five kilometers."

"So it's twenty-five kilometers. We can average four an hour or better. That's six hours. How many more hours of daylight have we?"

Ileth bit her lip, studied her chronometer.

"The days are short. The planet rotates in a little over fourteen hours. Alpha Centauri A sets first, in about an hour, I think. Then Alpha Centauri B about three hours later. Proxima rises about ten minutes after that but it doesn't cast much light."

"Never mind," he said almost roughly. "Come on. We'd better find the geographers quick."

THEY DID, a few minutes later, in one of the side canyons. That is, they found implements and two small piles of clothes. "I was afraid of this," said Saxon, his heart lowly sinking into his boots.

Ileth began to cry half in fright, half hysterically.

"None of that!" He shook her shoulders, until she stopped with a hiccup. Turning her loose, he bent over the instruments, secured a compass.

"We're northeast of the ship," he said. "that means if we travel in a southwesterly direction, we should hit it square on the nose. Let's hike!"

But they found it impossible to keep a true southwesterly course through the city. They walked along the deserted, resounding streets, their eyes filled with the fantastically lovely architecture of New York II, the flowing lines and gleaming planes of apartment houses built of a thousand substances from crystal to somber-veined black marble.

"To think," said Saxon, "that a people, any people, could have found it in their hearts to destroy a work like this."

"I'm glad I've seen it," Ileth replied queerly, "even if I did have to come to Alpha Centauri. It's lovely." She shivered.

Saxon said in perplexity, "Why did they let us escape? I don't understand it."

"We were in the foyer, alone, when it it must have happened," she suggested. "Maybe they overlooked us."

"Maybe," agreed Saxon doubtfully and paused.

They had come to the end of the city which stopped abruptly as if it had been set down in the middle of the green rolling prairie. Beyond the last building, a herd of cannibal plants rolled by, browsing as they went.

"It's going to be damned tricky keeping a straight course across this," he said.

"There doesn't seem to be a tree on the planet." He sighted the compass, picked out a round hill like the dome of a building, to the southwest. "We'll keep a little to the left of that hill."

ALPHA Centauri A was setting. By the time they had advanced a kilometer across the prairie it was gone. The orange light of Alpha Centauri B lent a queer unearthly complexion to the scene. It became perceptibly cooler, and a breeze sprang up from the east, bringing the faint scent of bitter almonds.

Saxon lengthened his stride. "We're not keeping to schedule," he said; then, "Look at that!"

A fawn colored creature like a large cat but with four pairs of legs, broke from a draw and went undulating across the grass.

"I'm getting tired," said Ileth in a small voice.

He took his eyes from the strange animal, studied the girl. The emotional turmoil which they'd been through had drained her of strength. Her features were white, drawn, her lids drooping over her hazel-green eyes. Her lashes, he thought, were the thickest curliest lashes he'd ever seen and black as her lustrous hair. He felt a tenderness well up inside him and banished it.

"We've got to make the ship. Walk until you drop. Then I'll carry you. But we have to get back as soon as possible."

Her features stiffened at the harshness of his words. He caught a weary flash of anger in her thoughts, then she turned and began to plod again toward the southwest.

"Faster," said Saxon.

Alpha Centauri B was setting when they reached the domed hill which Saxon had lined up with the compass. He left Ileth stretched exhausted at the base and climbed to the summit. His eyes swept the horizons with the last orange rays of the sun, but the *Shooting Star* was still not in sight.

By the time he rejoined Ileth, it was dark. "Did you see it?" the girl asked in a sleepy voice.

"No. We haven't come far enough, I suppose. We'll have to wait until Proxima rises before we can go on. That'll give us a chance to rest. How long before Proxima comes up?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes." She hesitated. "I'm cold."

Saxon put his arms around the shivering girl, pulled her against him. She gave a little sigh, laid her head on his shoulder. He caught her sleepy thoughts, "*Two times two is four. Three times two is six,*" and chuckled to himself.

The darkness was not dispelled very much when Proxima rose above the hills like a sullen red hot drop of metal. The light was red and wavering like the shimmering heat waves above a brush fire. Saxon could not see very well or very far. Nevertheless he awakened Ileth.

She rubbed her eyes, glanced about her in consternation. The change in light had brought about a startling change in the scenery. It looked as if it were bathed in blood.

She said, "Oh, Jon, I wish we were home. I wish we'd never come on this horrible expedition."

He didn't look up from his compass. "The ship can't be much further." He spotted the black gash of a gully a hundred yards ahead. "We'll walk to the gully, then pick out another object."

"I'm still tired. I don't feel as if I'd slept at all."

"You didn't—much. Only about ten minutes. Come on."

They reached the gully and Saxon found a cone-shaped hill looming up redly almost a quarter of a mile further on. They set out for it, Ileth holding his hand.

Their progress was necessarily slower because Saxon had to stop often and consult the compass. Even so, he began to be afraid that they had overshot the ship in the dark.

Slowly Proxima Centauri blazed its blood red path across the night sky.

Not far from Proxima a star twinkled faintly, steadily. It was about in the position that Sol should be. He wondered if it was.

"It's growing lighter," said Ileth.

Saxon glanced toward the east, recognized the graying darkness that heralded the dawn. He said, "Alpha Centauri A's rising. Maybe we can see where we are."

The light was quickening fast with dawn. Saxon climbed to the crest of a ridge, stared off into the southwest.

All at once his heart stood still. He called, "Ileth! Ileth! Come up here!"

The girl ran up the ridge, the urgency in his voice dispelling her weariness. "What is it, Jon?"

He pointed ahead. "Aren't those the hills south of the ship?"

She narrowed her eyes, studying the blue outlines in the dawn light. "Yes. But, Jon, where is the ship?"

He pointed at a blackened circle in the grass not an eighth of a kilometer distant. The circle was almost a thousand yards in diameter.

"That's where our jets burned the grass when we landed. That's where the *Shooting Star* was yesterday!"

In ten minutes they were tramping back and forth across the blackened circle of grass, kicking up little puffs of ashes. The mark of the jets were there, pressed deep in the soft soil. But those and the charred vegetation were the only signs that a ship had ever rested there.

Ileth flung herself dejectedly to the grass at the edge of the circle. "I'm so hungry and bone weary and thirsty and disappointed, I could cry."

Saxon sat down beside her. "I don't understand it," he said for the hundredth time. "I don't understand any of it."

All at once, his scalp began to prickle its warning and Saxon recognized the alien feel. At the same instant Ileth screamed, leaping to her feet. Saxon felt his mouth go dry, his stomach contract as he stumbled erect beside her.

Not ten yards distant, in the path of the rising sun, a naked man was materializing before their eyes. Saxon could see the grass and the hills and a segment of Alpha Centauri A through the man's body.

A thought struck into Saxon's mind. "So there you are." It emanated from the Alien. "We were afraid you might have gotten clean away."

Saxon realized the man was quite solid now, standing with bare feet planted in the pale green grass. There was an instrument like a watch strapped to his wrist. He was holding a small shiny cylinder.

Saxon caught an echo of Ileth's thought. "Oh Lord, he's naked as a grape!"

The man levelled the cylinder. There was a brief flash.

Saxon felt an instant's giddiness, a rapid dissolution, then nothing.

VII

JON SAXON COULDN'T HAVE been unconscious but a fraction of a second because he didn't have time to fall. He came to himself swaying dizzily, nauseated as if with space sickness.

He opened his eyes. He was blind!

The shock left him numb. Then gradually, like a flower unfolding its petals to the light, he felt his extra-human sixth sense assume control.

He became aware of the grass and the sun and the distant hills. Everything registered in varying degrees of grayness. It wasn't grayness exactly, but the word came as near to describing the peculiar impressions that external objects were registering on his sixth sense as his vocabulary could supply.

He didn't picture his environment; he realized it. The burned circle of grass, the naked alien...

A second shock rocked Saxon to his heels. The Alien!

Tentatively, almost timidly, he examined the strange figure confronting him. The man, for man he appeared to be, stood quietly several paces, sizing up Saxon with an equal degree of caution. The analogy to two strange dogs eyeing each other belligerently, but each afraid to make the first move, was so ludicrous that Saxon chuckled although no sound issued from his lips.

He sensed his opponent relax. The fellow was big the way Saxon was big, and the same virility radiated from him like a physical force.

The impressions received via his sixth sense were gaining in vividness. Saxon had never fully appreciated its scope before.

Then with the force of a blow, Ileth's terrified thoughts penetrated sharply to his mind.

I must be dead! Oh God, I'm dead!"

Saxon could perceive the girl cowering above a small pile of clothes, frightened, helpless, blind. She didn't have his extra-human sixth sense to substitute for sight. She was trembling violently, a slim-naked wraith without substance.

The little pile of clothes at her feet made it suddenly clear what had befallen Mercedes and the crew, what had happened to Ileth and himself. In some fashion, the

Aliens had transmuted them into a space where their three dimensional organs of perception no longer registered.

He moved to the girl, touched her arm.

Saxon was not conscious of a sense of contact, but a vague shock like a weak electric current ran up his arm to his brain. Ileth flinched back in terror.

Again he touched her arm, thinking, "*Ileth, am I getting through? Ileth, am I getting through?*" over and over again.

"Yes," came the unexpected answer. "*Yes. Yes. Is it you, Jon? We're dead, you know, Jon.*"

"No," he thought. "*We're not dead. We've been transmuted but we're not dead.*"

A command rang sharply in his disembodied mind. "*Lead the girl and follow me!*"

Saxon's attention swung back to the Alien, perceived the man threatening him with the cylinder which had blasted them into this indeterminate dimension.

"*Suppose I refuse?*" he thought.

"*I'm afraid that you underestimate the range of effect of this weapon.*" The Alien brandished the cylinder again. "*Follow me.*"

Saxon capitulated, touched Ileth. "*Keep in contact with me. I'll guide you.*" He began to move after the stranger who was already at a distance.

He didn't know how long they walked. Time had no expression in this state. Alpha Centauri A hung always in the same spot just above the horizon. He thought of Villainowski's inverted formula — "To travel through time during a passage of space." The Little Death must be like this, if one were conscious.

He was still turning it over in his mind when he perceived the station.

The station appeared to be a cubical structure like a large plastic block, except that the matter of which it was formed wasn't matter at all. It was energy, Saxon sensed, pulsating sheets of energy that must not be visible in the normal, three dimensional world.

The Alien stood to one side, motioned them through the shimmering walls.

Saxon was conscious of a throbbing rhythm which swept through him like the hum of a dynamo. He experienced the eerie giddiness for the second time and groped for Ileth before he blanked out.

THIS time Saxon was longer regaining consciousness. He came out from under the effects of the pulsation, feeling his flesh solid again. Air warmed and caressed his skin. He was materialized, he saw, as he leaped to his feet and opened his eyes.

He felt vaguely overwhelmed by the return of his senses. He had never before appreciated their infinite variety. The walls were yellow, lemon yellow; the floor cool and firm underfoot; the air had a faint odor of bitter almonds; and Ileth...

He said, "Open your eyes, Ileth. You'll be able to see better that way."

The girl's eyes popped open. She took one look at Saxon, then at herself. Her eyes grew rounder, her throat flamed.

She gasped, "Oh! You should have let me keep my eyes shut," and whipped her back to him.

She must have realized instantly that the view she presented was no better screened, for she sat down with a thump, saying, "Oh!" again. Then, in an embarrassed voice, "This is just like a dream I had once. Only everyone but me wore clothes in the dream, and there isn't a fig leaf between the three of us."

"The three of us?"

Saxon glanced around, discovered the Alien rummaging in one of the cabinets; from which he produced three of the gleaming kilts, tossed them each one.

"You humans," he said in an amused tone and perfect English, "have odd notions about concealing yourselves. Here."

Saxon gratefully buckled his kilt in place, examined the material. The threads were almost weightless and glowed like strands of light. With a start, he recalled where he had seen them before.

The man and the woman had been wearing kilts like these in his vision during the Little Death. Then...

His mind refused to entertain the possibility. And yet it was a piece of everything else. His inability to remember his childhood. The development of first a sixth sense at twenty-seven, then a seventh at thirty-one.

He strode abruptly to the windows and looked out.

The windows were at an elevation and gave a view of the strangest city he had ever beheld.

There were houses, at least they could be houses, spaced entirely without relation to each other and surrounded by immense park-like grounds. There were no congested areas within his range of vision. Neither was he able to discover roads or sidewalks, fences or walls anywhere.

Alpha Centauri A was still just rising, its orange twin not yet above the hills, which he could see in the distance.

He turned wonderingly back into the room.

Their guard regarded them in amusement. "Sit down," he suggested, indicating a bench.

They seated themselves.

"Ask him what they're going to do with us, Jon." Ileth nudged Saxon in the ribs.

Saxon cleared his throat.

Before he could speak, the guard smiled and said, "I haven't the faintest idea how they plan to dispose of you. Even if I did, that would be for Them to tell you." He nodded toward a closed door on their right. "They'll send for you any moment now."

"Who are 'they'?" Saxon asked.

"The Elders."

"What planet is this?"

"Vark." The guard's voice was pleasant. He smiled faintly when he talked. "The fourth planet of the sun you call Alpha Centauri A. This is the city of Ghibellena." He nodded out the windows.

"How did we get here? Teleportation?"

"Not exactly."

There was a momentary silence while the Alien observed them with that amused gleam in his eye. Then Saxon tried again. "Who are you? Why have you captured us?"

The man nodded briefly again towards the closed door. "You'll learn that in there—if They see fit to tell you."

"Where are the rest of the crew? Dead? In prison?"

"Oh, no. They've been taken to Zara."

"Zara? Where's Zara?"

"Zara is a satellite of the third planet. The one we call Tunis."

"What is that city we saw? The deserted one near the ship?"

Again the man smiled and nodded toward the door. "If They see fit to tell you."

Saxon shrugged burly shoulders. "How do you make yourselves invisible?"

Surprisingly enough the man answered.

"It's a refinement of your stellar drive, an excursion into the time field. In fact, it was discovered almost a hundred of your years ago by a Terran. A Dr. Walter."

Saxon looked disconcerted. Ileth swallowed, her eyes as round as saucers. Suddenly her hand squeezed his arm.

"The door! It's opening!"

"You may go in," said their guard.

"They're ready for you."

Saxon had risen uncertainly. He looked at the door which was receding into the wall. Through the portal, he glimpsed a terrace or a balcony, roofless. Beyond and below the terrace was a yellow sea stretching to the horizon, its cadmium waves frothing against a beach of black sand.

"They're expecting you," the guard prompted.

Saxon shrugged. Taking Ileth's arm, he went through the opening. The door slid shut behind them.

THE BALCONY, Saxon saw, was paved checkerboard fashion with green and yellow blocks. At the left, out of sight from the entrance, was a twenty foot table of pale green stone. Seven incredibly old men sat behind the table.

No one said anything.

Saxon took the initiative, advanced to within six feet of the pale green table. His dark gray eyes narrowed. He was vaguely conscious of a flow of thought passing among the seven old men like conversation, but its content escaped him. His jaw jutted angrily.

"Control your anger, my son," said the old man in the center. "Your thoughts should be respectful in the presence of your elders."

Saxon concealed his astonishment, asking, "Might I inquire what this mummery is all about?" He became aware again of the hidden thoughts flowing between them.

Then the old man in the center said, "I am the moderator, my son. Your mind, we have perceived, teems with questions. We have decided that from the psychological angle, certain of these questions can now be answered."

"Psychological angle?" Saxon felt confused. The deviousness of the Aliens, the maddening superiority which they assumed

begin to get under his skin. With an effort, he got a grip on himself, returned their curious stares.

The seven old men were wrinkled, emaciated. Once they had been big men like Saxon, but the years had wasted their flesh.

"That's better," approved the Moderator, referring to Saxon's change of tactics. "Now for your questions," and he seemed to look straight into Saxon's mind.

"Very early in our history," began the Moderator after a moment, "we learned that we advanced in the physical sciences by trial and error. A disheartening process, because only so many combinations can be tried in a single lifetime..."

"What the hell has this got to do with us?" Saxon interrupted harshly.

"Patience, my son. I'm explaining the relation between our world and the third planet of Sol which you call Earth."

A little muscle began to jump in Saxon's jaw.

"Trial and error," the old man began again. "A slow heartbreaking process, and one which in its nature is inescapable. At least, so we thought until quite recently." He paused, tugged at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger.

Saxon mastered an impulse to shout, "Get to the point!"

"Recently," went on the moderator, "we tried an experiment in our biological laboratories which we hoped would speed up the trial-and-error formula.

"By exposing the germ plasm of a semi-intelligent anthropoid inhabiting the fourth planet of this system to hard radiations, we succeeded in creating a mutant, a biologic sport who's life span was only an instant of time. It matured, mated and died in an incredibly brief period.

"They were startlingly prolific as well; they multiplied like—like—" he groped for a simile—"like guinea pigs or rats.

"Furthermore, they early exhibited the most amazing ingenuity. In twenty generations they had fire; in thirty, crude implement of stone."

Saxon, unable to restrain his impatience longer, cried, "The point, man—get to the point."

The old man gave Saxon a steely look. "We recognized," he went on stiffly, "the significance of our mutation. As soon as

the semi-intelligent sports developed a science, we could expect the trial and error method to be speeded up. A life-time of experiment to them was only a moment to us.

"We isolated them on the fifth planet of our sun. But it soon became apparent that they constituted a dangerous menace even that close. They were so fecund, and their ferocity was appalling. Wars broke out between various tribes. They murdered each other by the thousands."

Gradually Saxon's interest had been caught by the history of the semi-reasoning mutants whose ferocity and proliferation had constituted a menace to their creators. He glanced at Ileth, discovered her spellbound.

The Moderator's voice was growing thinner.

"Luckily," he was saying, "stellar travel was accomplished at this time. We exported several thousand of the creatures to another star system and destroyed the rest.

"The environment on the planet where we transplanted our colony of humanoids was ideal for our purpose—harsh and savage. Several species of bipeds with rudimentary intelligence already inhabited the planet, but our own culture speedily wiped them out and were happily warring among themselves..."

A suspicion began to grow in Saxon's mind. He blurted, "On what planet did you introduce this culture?"

The Moderator paused, stared Saxon coolly in the eye.

"Earth!" he said.

SAXON and Ileth looked at each other incredulously, unable to comprehend the significance of the Moderator's answer.

"Earth?" repeated Saxon. "I don't understand."

The Moderator wrinkled his brow, and said, "I don't know how to put it any more clearly. We transplanted our biological sports to Earth. The two sub-human races which our humanoids exterminated were the Cro-Magnards and the Neanderthals."

Saxon's brain reeled. "Do you mean that man as we know him, homo sapiens, originated in your laboratories as—an experiment?"

He heard Ileth laugh hysterically.

"Precisely," replied the Moderator. "And I might add that the experiment has proven successful. During the last thousand years they have supplied us with hundreds of discoveries and developments. The real nature of the space time continuum, for example."

"The creatures are inordinately clever at the physical sciences—as was to be expected from an emotionally unstable, rationalizing mammal under the pressure of such an antagonistic environment. Our own laboratories have become, for all practical purposes, unnecessary!"

Ileth was staring at the Moderator with wide horrified eyes. "I," she gasped. "I am a humanoid? I don't live but a moment? I'm prolific and savage and—and clever like a monkey? Why, you shriveled up old bag of bones, that's the most stupid pack of lies I've ever heard!"

The Moderator regarded her compassionately. "You haven't changed because I've told you the truth. Your life expectation is no shorter. It's a matter of relativity. To us our ten thousand years seems no longer than your three score and ten does to you."

"Ten thousand years?" exploded Saxon. The sum was so staggering that it was only a figure to him. "Then—" he began, but the Moderator answered before he could speak.

"No. I was not born when the experiment with the humanoids began. They were developed some twenty-five thousand years ago."

Ileth began to laugh crazily, unable to stop. In a moment she would be hysterical. Saxon shook her roughly. "Stop it!"

"I—I—I can't" she giggled. "Either he's mad or I am." Her words ended in a flood of tears.

Saxon put his arm around the girl, turned back to the Moderator. "It was done with hard radiations?"

"Yes. In the resultant mutants their metabolism had been accelerated beyond our wildest expectation. Their life cycle geared to their metabolism passed through its different phases like—like..." again he fished in Saxon's mind for a simile. "Like a meteor. By artificially slowing down their metabolism they returned to their normal life span."

"You've been very curious about the

replica of New York II which you saw when you landed."

Saxon nodded, trying to conceal a thought which had begun to take shape in the back of his mind.

"It's just that. A replica of a city built during the Atomic Age by the humanoids. Their constant implacable wars are so savage that we've found it necessary to duplicate their work here, if we hope to preserve any of it for study."

Saxon narrowed his eyes, asked, "You spoke of the menace of having such savage neighbors. Just how serious was such a threat?"

THE Moderator smiled and glanced at his constituents. Saxon strained to grasp the thoughts flowing between them, but failed utterly.

"Admirable!" the Moderator commented suddenly. "Your reactions, my son, are leading us to hope we may turn in the most optimistic report."

Saxon stared at him as if he were crazy. Ileth's tears had subsided to a snuffle.

"Now for your question," said the Moderator and coughed again.

"The menace was real, not imaginary. We had created a monster that would be either a marvelous scientific instrument, or—the means of our destruction.

"Remember, my son, time is relative. These creatures lived, fought, loved, begat children, carried on scientific research and died, all in seventy short years. They existed at fever intensity. Their metabolism burns them up.

"Our lives are adjusted to a span of ten thousand years. We have a total population of little over a million. We are neither a war-like people, nor a highly-industrialized people.

"In one of their generations the humanoids accomplish almost as much as we do in one of ours. Think, my son, they perform in seventy years what it takes us ten thousand to do.

"If it ever came to hostilities between us we'd be doomed, overwhelmed almost before we realized what was happening."

Saxon listened in astonishment. The thought in the back of his mind kept trying to push to the fore, but he repressed it, afraid that the Aliens might see it.

"Their amazing fecundity," the Modera-

tor was saying, "their short life spans, their ingenuity and ferocity made them a very real menace even isolated outside our stellar system. Fortunately, we also foresaw the inevitable crisis and prepared for it."

"Crisis?" Saxon echoed.

"The time when the humanoid would reach our scientific level and surpass us," said the Moderator in a grim voice. "That time has arrived!"

IX

SOMEWHERE A BELL BEGAN TO ring shrilly. Saxon saw an expression of annoyance pass across the Moderator's wrinkled visage. He pressed a button set in the table top. The bell stopped ringing. A voice began to speak in an alien tongue directly behind Saxon. The burly nuclear physicist spun around in surprise.

He was looking into the control room of a small private space yacht!

The deception was so realistic that Saxon gasped before he noticed the three beams of light converging from lenses in the wall, focusing at a point directly behind him to form the solid appearing image. A three-dimensional televisor complete with sound!

Then all speculation was driven from his mind as he recognized the figure who was speaking.

Mustapha IX, Supreme Autocrat of the Terran Empire!

The image of Mustapha sat stiffly in an acceleration chair before the control panel of the space yacht. His voice, rattling away in the strange language, was high, tense, frightened.

Saxon, unable to understand, looked over his shoulder at the seven old men. They were all on their feet, staring in disbelief at the three dimensional image. The Moderator's hands began to tremble. He sat down as if his knees had turned to water.

The voice rattled on and on.

At last Mustapha IX quit talking. The Moderator pressed the button. The image dissolved.

A stunned silence followed, as one by one the old men sank back to their seats. Saxon, devoured with curiosity, asked, "What was it?"

The Moderator gave him a level glance. "That was the man you know as Mustapha IX, Supreme Autocrat of the Terran Em-

pire. He was reporting from his private yacht which has just emerged from the time field and is decelerating. It'll be a week before he lands on Vark."

"Mustapha IX?" Saxon burst out. "Here on Vark? But that's impossible. What's he doing—"

"There's been civil war," the Moderator interrupted savagely. "General Atomic has overthrown Government. General Atomic is the Terran Government now!"

"But I don't see . . ." protested Saxon.

"Bah! I spoke of controls. Naturally our first necessity has been to control the humanoid's government. The Supreme Autocrats have all been Varkans, our governors, which we sent to Earth!"

"Now Mustapha IX has had to flee for his life. Most of our agents on Earth have been murdered. Only a handful escaped with him!"

The Moderator pressed another button, began to speak rapidly, tonelessly in the alien language into a microphone. The thoughts of the seven old men were flashing back and forth like streaks of light behind their mental barrier. The crisis, Saxon realized, had arrived with a vengeance!

Suddenly the guard came running through the door in answer to a summons by the Moderator. For the first time Saxon intercepted a thought as the Moderator directed the guard to take the prisoners away.

"Send the girl to Zara," he commanded the guard. "Confine the man here until we can check results!"

"Come along," said the guard in a tight voice to Saxon and Ieth. He took hold of Ieth's arm. The girl shrank away from him, frightened by the swift and ominous change which had come over their captors.

Saxon's eyes went bleak. The guard jerked back as he caught a glimpse of Saxon's intentions, but he wasn't quick enough.

Saxon's balled first caught him on his left cheek bone, sent him sprawling to the checkered pavement. Saxon was on him like a wolf. Wrenching the cylinder from the stunned guard's belt, he backed off swinging the unfamiliar weapon in a menacing arc.

He saw the withered faces of the Elders blanch. They pressed stiffly against the back of their chairs, jaws sagging. The guard



He backed off, swinging the unfamiliar weapon.

scrambled to his feet. He shook his head groggily but made no move to attack Saxon.

Triumph welled up inside Jon Saxon. He said, "The shoe's on the other foot. I don't know how this damned thing works, but there's a button. Unless you start answering my questions straight we'll see what happens if I press it."

He paused. The seven old men glared at him but said nothing.

"How did General Atomic discover your agents? Why didn't their invisibility protect them?"

The Moderator moistened his lips. "The humanoids devised a machine that detects us. An adaption of the thought projector, which enabled them to detect our telepathic potential. Once they could isolate our thought waves, they were able to trace them to their source by a process similar to locating the source of a radio beam."

Saxon narrowed his eyes, recalling the thought projector which the radiation

branch of Government's Bureau of Research had been experimenting with. So that's how General Atomic had uncovered the Aliens.

"General Atomic," the Moderator was saying, "suspected the existence of mutants, telepaths, ever since an agent of theirs by the name of Emil turned in a report on you!"

Saxon started.

The Moderator's first fright was over, he realized. The old man was regarding him with a faint smile.

Saxon glanced behind him in alarm; but there was nothing there. He clenched his fist until the knuckles whitened. "What other methods did you use to keep the humanoids in check?"

There was a subtle change in the voice of the Moderator when he answered. It was ringing, hard. "As I said, we foresaw this crisis. To discourage stellar travel we planted a pathologic fear of deep space in the humanoid subconscious.

"Certain of their discoveries we have suppressed. Notably, the space-time stellar drive. The Little Death, as you call it, has been discovered three separate times in the past thousand years."

"What?"

"Yes. Are you surprised? Once by an unknown scientist, once by a physicist, Dr. Walter, and lastly by Dr. Villainowski."

Although Saxon still held the alien weapon, he had the uncomfortable sensation that a trap had been sprung and the Moderator was only waiting for it to close on him.

With a suffocating tenseness, he asked, "What am I?"

"You," said the Moderator, "are a test experiment!"

"What?"

"A test experiment. On your psychological reactions will depend the ultimate fate of the humanoids!"

"A test experiment," he repeated dazedly. "What do you mean?"

"Simply this. For some time we've realized that steps must be taken to curb the rapaciousness of the humanoids."

"But me . . ."

The Moderator held up his hand.

"I'm coming to you. If the ruthless savagery of the humanoids was instinctive, part of their heredity, there was little that could be done except destroy them."

"But if, on the other hand, their natures resulted from the pressure of their environment, we might be able to modify that environment and salvage our experiment."

"But what the hell am I? What did you mean when you said I was a test experiment?"

The Moderator seemed to have forgotten the existence of Saxon's weapon. He tugged at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger. "You are not a humanoid. You are one of us, a Varkan. We placed you as a baby on Earth to be raised as a humanoid."

"I was eleven," protested Saxon.

"A mere baby still, with psychological plasticity." The Moderator waved the objection aside. "If your disposition hardened into humanoid characteristics, then we would be safe in assuming that the humanoids, too, were a product of their environment."

"Of course, there were factors we couldn't control. The natural unfolding of your sixth and seventh senses in early childhood—"

Saxon burst out, "But I was twenty-seven when I developed a sixth sense and thirty-one—"

"My son, that's quite true. But you're only in your adolescence now."

"At thirty-eight," said Saxon in disbelief, "I'm an adolescent?"

The Moderator nodded. "And precocious at that!"

Ileth giggled again nervously.

SAXON gave a short laugh. He had a feeling that he had been stuffed too full of information. He couldn't digest it. In spite of the suspicions he had entertained concerning his birth, he was unable to really believe that he was an Alien!

He glanced suddenly at Ileth. The girl had shrunk away from him as if he were a leper. Her hazel-green eyes were horrified. All at once, she began to cry.

Saxon tried to pat her shoulder, but she wrenched away. The action drove a needle of pain into his heart. He realized in a numbed fashion how fond he had grown of the girl.

"Fond, hell!" he thought savagely, "I'm in love with her."

"My son," came the hated voice of the Moderator, "she is not for you."

"What do you mean?" Saxon shouted.

The Moderator regarded him a moment, his eyes veiled. Then, "The psychologist is ready to give you his report. As a true human, you have the right to hear it."

A shriveled, wrinkled man at the end of the table began to address Saxon in a dry voice.

"I've been probing your reactions as the truth was revealed to you. You can understand the importance of an accurate judgment, when you know that the fate of our experiment rests on the manner in which you conformed to a humanoid environment."

"Experiment be damned!" Saxon flung out. "What about me?"

The psychologist permitted himself a vague smile. "Your reactions have been typically humanoid."

"You have been bewildered, frightened, angry."

"You tried to think first of some way by which you could destroy us. Failing that, you cast about in your mind for some compromise which would cause us to hold our hand until we could be either conquered or wiped out—preferably wiped out. These are typically humanoid reactions to a dangerous foe.

"Under the circumstances we can preserve our experiment if we can modify the humanoids' environment."

Saxon felt relief. Whatever the Aliens planned, they weren't going to destroy mankind.

The psychologist having delivered his report, the Moderator resumed, "It is unfortunate in a way for you, my son, that the test has been so favorable to the humanoids.

"They live and die so fast that in a few generations we can correct their savage dispositions.

"But you have solidified in the humanoid mould. You will have to undergo a dangerous operation. Our psychologist must induce infantile retrogression in you. When you have been reduced mentally, to the age of eleven, then your re-education can begin.

"I'll be perfectly frank. You have about one chance in ten of retaining your sanity. The danger lies in that retrogression once activated in your brain cells. It cannot always be halted."

Saxon's laugh was a croak, "You forget I've still the weapon."

The Moderator said, "It's time that this nonsense stopped. We've allowed you to retain the cylinder in order to observe your reactions. Look around you!"

Saxon spun around.

Materializing like gray wraiths, a dozen figures were taking substance behind him. They were all armed with shining cylinders.

"Drop it!" commanded the Moderator.

Saxon's weapon clanged against the pavement.

ILETH suppressed a scream, swayed, half fainting. Saxon caught her before she fell. The girl recovered, flung her arms about his neck.

"You can't do it!" she stormed at the Elders. "You can't. I love him. I don't care what he is, I love him, I tell you!"

"Take them away!" the Moderator said imperiously.

The wraiths had grown solid. They began to close in.

Saxon's spine stiffened. He said, "Wait a moment!" in a breathless voice. "Have you overlooked the five sets of plans for Villainowski's stellar drive? The ones that were stolen from Government's Research Building?"

The Moderator's face went gray. For the second time Saxon intercepted a thought flowing between the seven old men.

A fear thought! Pure funk!

Saxon's heart leaped like an arrow as the realization burst on him that the seven old men were terrified of the humanoids. They were so badly frightened that for a moment their guard had relaxed and the fear thought had escaped past their mental barriers.

If only there was a way to exploit their fear. He felt hope surging back through his veins.

"Already," he shouted, "General Atomic must be manufacturing the ships. And you can't stop it. The secret of stellar travel is loose among the humanoids!"

"We know of the loss of the plans. General Atomic is laying the keels of thousands of the new-type ships. But that doesn't affect your fate in the least."

"Doesn't it?" said Saxon harshly. "I'm the only Varkan who can compete with the humanoids. I'm the only one who's been conditioned to the speed of their reflexes."

"You're a dangerous anti-social!" the Moderator snapped. "Your auto-reactions approach the humanoid level because you're still a child with a child's adaptiveness. When you mature you'll appreciate the difference. We wouldn't dare use you even if you could do anything. If worst comes to worst we can destroy our experiment!"

Saxon laughed at him. "And how many generations of humanoids would have passed away before you could wipe out a culture that's spread to all the planets of its solar system? Why, they'll be swarming over Vark from pole to pole before you can prepare to repel them."

The Moderator winced, tried to interrupt, but Saxon was inexorable.

"You might have been able to destroy them while you had them isolated in their own Solar System. But they're free now. Free to expand through the Galaxy!"

Saxon paused. The idea sprouting some

time ago had begun to bear fruit. He pushed it resolutely out of his mind lest they intercept it.

The Moderator asked with narrowed eyes, "You have an idea, haven't you?"

Saxon could feel the Aliens probing at his thoughts like a scalpel laying bare his skull.

"Two times two is four. Three times two is six," he thought hastily and fealized the seven old men were on the verge of apoplexy.

There was a tense moment of silence as their wills clashed. Then the Moderator asked, "What's your price?"

"Freedom for myself and the crew. Hands-off policy for the humanoids."

The silence deepened.

Again Saxon became aware of those flickering baffling thoughts as the seven old men conferred behind their mental shields.

At last, grudgingly, the Moderator spoke, "That depends on your success."

Saxon didn't relax. He had won only if he had guessed the right answer to a question that had been obsessing him. If he was right, he would need no guarantee to hold the Aliens to their promise.

"You said that when the metabolism of the humanoids was slowed they returned to their normal life span. Does that mean that you can actually lengthen their lives to equal yours?"

The Moderator looked puzzled, nodded. "A comparatively simple operation, but..."

"But nothing!" Saxon almost shouted. "If their life span is the same as yours, then they'll be on the same time scale. Their fecundity is the direct result of their shortened life cycle. They'll no longer constitute a menace!"

Hope blazed temporarily in the Moderator's eyes, then went out. When he spoke next his voice was cold, dead.

"But that takes time. Before we could effect the change several generations of humanoids would have lived and died. We'd be conquered!"

Saxon laughed outright. "Of course, you people couldn't effect the change quick enough, but other humanoids could. You have Ileth here. She's a General Atomic agent. You have the crew and some of the

best brains on Earth isolated on Zara. They could do it!"

The Moderator drew in his breath sharply. "But would they be willing to cooperate?"

"What a question!" roared Saxon. "Would mankind be willing to increase their life span ten thousand years? They'll jump at it!"

ZARA was a diminutive green little world, held in thrall by the third planet of Alpha Centauri A. A miniature heaven of soft breezes and crystal streams and gravity so slight that Saxon felt buoyant as a bubble.

He said in rare good humor, "So there it is. The Varkans can't slow the metabolic rate of billions of humanoids by force or by themselves in time."

He was surrounded by the members of the expedition, to whom he had just explained the proposal of the Aliens to extend mankind's normal life span to an unthinkable age.

With his arm around Ileth's slim waist, he had watched suspicion give way to hope and hope to wild enthusiasm. Only Villainowski appeared disgruntled.

"It's more than I can stomach," growled the Chief, "to think of perpetuating General Atomic in power practically forever."

Saxon leaned close, said in a lowered voice, "You don't believe that if the people have ten thousand years to contemplate the iniquity of General Atomic, they'll continue to be duped. It'll be the death blow to all the big corporations."

He straightened, returning his arm to Ileth's waist. "There's no reason for you to return to Earth with the rest of them, Villainowski. There's a lot to see here, a lot to learn. Ileth and I are going to spend..."

He frowned, called, "Hey, Mercedes. You're the anthropologist. What was that barbaric custom practiced by newly-married couples during the pre-Atom age?"

"The honeymoon." Mercedes chuckled, turned to the faintly pink Ileth, pinched her cheek. "Don't look so frightened, child. The first ten thousand years are the hardest."



Suddenly Kroner blasted his shoulder jets.

MIND WORMS

By Moses Schere

Glowing softly out there in the black nothingness—writhing evilly—what was their terrible power that could drive a ship's crew gibbering out the airlocks?

THE AMBASSADOR, WHOSE smile had grown fixed, whose thin, broad-domed face was lined and tired, bowed before the screen saying, "Thank you—thank you."

On Earth, 26,000,000 miles away, a billion saw his final bow and cheered him. "Luck! Luck! Luck!" they roared.

His screen in his suite on the space ship *Ceres* finally went blank and the voice of the ship's operator cut in nervously, "I'll j-jibe with the Center Room beam in a moment, sir." The operator, a capable man, was frightened. The Ambassador had more reason to be frightened; he took the moment in which he was unlinked from Earth to wipe one hand nervously down across his face.

"On C-Center Room, Ambass—"

The operator at either end was cut off as the tight official beams met in mid space. A different voice, older and deep bass, said, "Relax, Phil." The Ambassador let his silvery cloak fall from its dramatic sweep about his shoulders and stood naturally, tall, a little stooped, heavy-shouldered, greying in the prime of his life at seventy-five. His screen, which had been flashing to him a montage of the crowds in Times Square, in Trafalgar Square, in the Champ de Mars, in Red Square, filled with a view of Center Room, from which the Earth was governed.

The bass voice, backed by a large and friendly smile, belonged to the President, who sat at the head of the great ivory table

in the huge, soft-lit room. They all were there, the men whom custom deprived of a name when it gave them their titles—the Executive Secretary, the Coordinator for Education, the Coordinator for Energy, the Terrestrial and Astral Coordinators for Commerce and the half-dozen others who possessed the ten-year term. If, privately, they called each other George and Ahmed and Sven, it was for relaxation from the standard of dignity expected of them.

At the foot of the table sat a small group of important guests, and all the white, black, yellow and brown faces were turned to the image of the Ambassador who waited for permission from the Venusians to step upon Venus.

"Take it easy, Phil," the President said.

The Ambassador forced a smile. "Alec, when it's all over, I will."

"It can't fail. The very fact that after fifty years of trying they're finally willing to receive an Earthman and will consider trade—" The President made a large, gathering gesture: *Everything's in the force-field*. "For fifty years," he said with the reassurance the Ambassador so greatly needed, "we've been dropping them capsules of Earth goods and the means to learn our language. Drop, drop, drop, and we've worn away the stone. Can't fail, Phil."

"I know," the Ambassador said. He thought: It isn't that. It was the triple-distilled inferiority complex which gripped him and shook him. The dread of the terrible brains below Venus' mist.

One by one around the table they gave him brief, friendly God-speed. The distinguished guests were properly more formal with, "The Assembled Physicists have asked me to convey to you all our best wishes, Ambassador," and more on that style. He thanked them gravely.

ONE guest, however, distinctly annoyed him. It was Rupert Hoag, the last of the pioneers, that walking fossil from the first days of space travel. "Wide-open, Ambassador," he creaked with an antiquarian reference to atom-jets and a wave of his one hand that was not formal at all. Otherwise crippled from long-ago radiations was Hoag, but at a hundred and forty his one eye was bright. Probably he had not been invited to the gathering but

just had barged in, being one of the half-dozen holders of High Privilege, that peculiar, all-inclusive reward for distinguished service. The trouble with Hoag was that he never would confine himself, like a decent old-timer, to remarking on the progress his years had seen.

This official farewell had a purpose. The men on Earth, secure and sane, were trying to give one last tenuous thread of security to the very sane, very well-adjusted (on Earth) Ambassador who in space was ready for a mental crack-up. No psychiatry or long-distance hypnosis had yet prevailed against the rampant inferiority, the primitive and infantile desire to crawl and hide which came often to Earthmen in the presence of alien, superior races. A foreigner who came to Earth they could respect and that was all; a foreigner met after a trip through space they met with their every fear and complex laid naked perhaps by artificial gravity, by unknown rays—by something.

Lampell, the first to make contact with the first unworldly race—Good Lord, Lampell actually had been a contemporary of leering old Hoag, there!—had met on Mars a cynical bunch of mental wizards who had had, and still had the most unholy good time with the bumbling Earthmen who would dare anything for trade. Of Lampell's crew, twelve out of forty returned sane, half-dead but sane, and the twelve did not include Lampell, first to set foot on Mars. That had been eighty years ago. Two other cultures were discovered in the next thirty years, those on Jupiter and upon Saturn's moon Phoebe. Always, the first few to expose their naked, terrified minds to a cosmic sophistication met the same fate. There was an old saying which the Ambassador now remembered a little too clearly:

Crazy as an ambassador . . .

The Ambassador jerked his hand away from his face. But all in Center Room had seen the desperate gesture, made as though one could wipe away fear.

"Say, Ambassador." That was old Hoag. "Say, Ambassador, I've been saving you something to tell you."

Annoyance ran around the ivory table. But High Privilege was High Privilege. All Hoag had to tell the public was that the Ten-year men hadn't been polite to him—

"Say, Ambassador, you know, I had a funny experience once, my first trip to Phoebe. Was the second trip made there, by the way. Mighty funny experience and it wasn't ever made public, because you know how things were." The old man chuckled rustily. "Nobody wanted to say anything against space travel until all the stock was sold. But I've been saving it up for a time just like this, to tell an Ambassador who's on a spot. Been saving up—" Hoag's mind seemed to skip, and he banged the table, laughing. "Yes sir, that was years before the Phoebean platinum scandal, and what Rupert Hoag ever had to do with that scandal, I'm not saying!"

The Ambassador said pointedly, "I understand that you were rather fortunate upon Phoebe, Captain Hoag." His voice was unsteady with anger. The President signalled across space, anxiously, that he should please be patient.

Hoag, still laughing and shaking his bald, scarred head reminiscently, settled back in his chair of little tension-bubbles. "Take a load off your feet, Ambassador, and listen. Wish I could give you a cigar."

The Ambassador took a load off his feet while the old man lit up in great comfort. As well, the Ambassador thought, to bore himself with Hoag while waiting for a Venusian signal as to pace about with jangling nerves. Soothing music, escapist motion pictures he could not listen to or look at, not in the grip of inferiority and fear.

HOAG blew a smoke ring. "Those days, a space ship didn't go much faster than that ring compared to nowadays. You know how we had to do when we headed for an outside planet? Took off in the direction of the Earth's revolution so our speed would be greater than Earth's and we'd tend to spiral away from the Sun, and we'd have to take a gravity-pull off a planet here and a gravity-pull off a planet there to detour us wherever we wanted to go. Many's the ship missed connections, or with the metal of those days she blew her tubes away and she's out there yet in an orbit, just a coffin. Or those that first tried for Venus but went into the Sun . . . a lot of good friends of mine, Ambassador." The old man stared bleakly ahead of him for a moment.

"And of course there was just the radar that never could follow you much beyond five million miles. I was the first one to circle the Moon, y'know," he put in with senile pride. "Repaired a jet in mid-course. My hand came off a month later."

"But, as I was saying, this was on the way to Phoebe, and about a month out . . ."

The old man finally dug into his story and as he warmed up to it so did his listeners, although with a kind of self-apology for being interested in one of those gaudy old adventure yarns of the times when the long ships had to stand on their tails to blast off the Earth. They'd wobble up on polymerized liquid fuel, not daring to start the atom-blast till they were well beyond the atmosphere, then jerk away at the heads of their beautiful, wasteful fiery trains. Even the early atom-drive required conservation, so that it was necessary to take those long leap-frog curves from gravity-field to gravity-field, during which, as the ship coasted, its blast-eroded tube liners could be replaced.

The *Lone Star*, Hoag's ship—he was an unregenerate Texan—had to cut her drive on one of these occasions. A number of her crew, in shielded clumsy space suits, were at work at the stern upon those terrifically radio-active liners while they hoped for the best. Her primitive screens picked up some approaching objects and in a little while the great worms, almost as long as the 500-foot ship, faintly glowing, swam into plain view against the backdrop of illimitable stars.

"Worms," Hoag repeated, waving his cigar. "Space-worms."

They were perhaps ten times as long as they were thick, blunt-ended, with a cluster of tentacles at each end and another cluster belting them in the middle, all the tentacles gently moving and apparently propelling them. They were covered, including the tentacles, with a crystalline shell that had no visible opening, but there was an eye that swam under this shell anywhere along the body. What metabolic process they sustained in space could not be said. It probably was similar to that of the solar nautilus which floats in great colonies, paper shelled, on the pressure of light inside the orbit of Mercury, each colony like one vast resentful brain.

There were six of these worms. They

gyrated in peculiar patterns, at one time joining their bodies to form a gigantic hoop around the ship. Different radiation patterns were made evident upon the ship's dials, and it was obvious that these vermiform beings were trying to communicate. Neither Hoag nor his two interpreters could make anything of the radiation patterns, and one of the interpreters, after trying hard, sat blindly in a corner and shivered.

Inferiority complex. Or that for a beginning while alien minds strove impatiently to penetrate the naked and shivering Earth minds. This was space, and worse it was space in the old times before warp-vibrant communication, before rattled Earthmen could scream to a home base for moral support.

The crew was still out there at the tubes when those worms came along, and before they could crawl or jet their way to the airlock, one of the worms plucked up a crew member. It was Able-bodied Space-man Kroner, as capable and steady and fearless a man who ever had boarded the *Lone Star*. Kroner was seen at first to go rigid while the worm held him with two tentacles and looked him over with that submerged, swimming eye.

Suddenly Kroner blasted his oxygen-alcohol shoulder jets. The worm let him go and recoiled.

KRONER slammed away into space, into nothingness. Suddenly, almost at the half-limit of his short supply of fuel, he turned on his own axis. He was expert, this Kroner, and had flipped his jet control so perfectly that he had turned a hundred and eighty degrees and for a couple of seconds he kept going directly backward on momentum against the jets' renewed forward blast. While that happened he jerked his arms and legs in a wild, running motion, running as though forward while still going backward. It was a comic thing to see.

But at the instant of equilibrium between forward motion and backward motion, those in the *Lone Star's* control compartment caught Kroner's face at a high magnification upon the screen.

"He'd been frightened mad," Hoag said. "We didn't need any doctor to tell us. We saw his face. And what he was shrieking

all that time was, 'Ma—Ma—Ma—Ma—'"

He came at *Lone Star* like a meteor, his arms outstretched as though running to the safety of maternal arms, and he hit the space ship so hard that he started a seam in her outer skin. Whether he was killed by the impact or by the rupture of his suit was a rhetorical question. The man's body exploded outward in frozen streamers through the rents in the suit. The space worm plucked him up, examined him, casually tore the broken suit and the corpse into pieces . . .

And, in the control compartment, the Second Officer began to scream and to hide, forcing his way into an impossible recess behind a switchboard.

Inferiority complex. That, the helpless psychologists always said, was at the root of the madness when space travelers' primitive fears and emotions were lashed up by the whip of space. Lampell, long ago, seemed to have brought back a virus from some planet, an endemic disease that took control of all but the most hearty when confronted by new, terrible, intelligent life forms.

"It was the cold knowingness of those worms," Hoag said reflectively. "It was the feeling that you were licked before you started. I felt the complex, and I had a terrible desire to escape my death. The only refuge for my mind, from those merciless minds, was in death. If I hadn't been a captain, with responsibility such an instinct within me, maybe I would have picked up a gun . . . but I didn't."

He forced himself to try to communicate. There was radio and radar and the first model of the beam. They ignored them all. And finally, with an effort of will against the fear which literally sickened him, he put on a suit and went out upon the shell of *Lone Star* with a paint-spray. The worms watched while he painted for them that ancient, universal mathematical proposition, *The sum of the squares of the sides equals the square of the hypotenuse*.

They looked, with their horrible eyes. And finally, all together, they turned away in unmistakable disgust.

They began to build a little solar system. Of nothingness they fashioned the black spheres—flipped them into shape with complicated motions of their tentacles. Nine they made, and set them in space with an

approximation of the distances between the planetary orbits. It was the same kind of approximation which is necessary in any model of the solar system, for no model in which the planets are of recognizable size can cope, in scale, with inter-orbital distances.

Finally the worms grouped themselves in the center of all, merging their body glow into a fair replica of the sun. And all the eyes watched the space ship while they waited for the stupid little beings within to understand.

"Couldn't reach our poor minds with their vibrations, so they gave us something solid to look at. What did it mean? That they were the architects of the solar system? Some of my crew were screaming we had met God. All I knew was that we had to get out of there while a few of us were sane. Finally I drove a work gang outside to the tubes again, leading them myself, and we got to work on the liners, trying not to look at the worms and their solar system but feeling their eyes and feeling their awful, overpowering intelligence right through our suits . . ."

A buzzer cut in, not upon the tight beam but upon the *Ceres'* communicator.

"Excuse me, Captain Hoag," the Ambassador said acidly. "There is word from Venus: It seems I have *business* to attend to."

The old man, back on Earth, paused, and the President said, "We'll stay on beam, Phil, till you go."

"Say, wait a minute" Hoag said anxiously. "I didn't get to the point of the story."

But the Ambassador had walked out of the room.

He met the *Ceres'* captain hurrying toward him, white-faced. Infected by the man's haste and half-hysterical injunction to waste no time, he almost ran to the special communications compartment.

HERE, in a screen whose outside viewer pointed downward, he saw the smooth, liquid-seeming blanket of Venusian grey clouds, weirdly touched with iridescence by a blinding sun. The clouds, believed to be over a hundred miles thick, blanketed the entire planet. They might contain water and oxygen somewhere below; here, where they touched space, they

were metallic vapor charged so heavily that no beam could ever penetrate them. The Martians, who awesomely never lied, had told Earthmen that Venusians existed; told them contemptuously. It would not be wise to attempt a landing upon Venus without permission, the Martians had said. Not wise for Earthmen, at any rate.

Because of the peculiar vapor there never had been electronic or warp communication with Venus. So far, the only message from below those clouds had come a month before to one of the patiently waiting, patiently capsule-dropping ships—the permission to land one unarmed ambassador. The Ambassador saw now that communication this time had been by the same means. A rocket had come up through the clouds, trailing a wire, and had been caught in the great cable net extended behind the space ship.

"I had the wire plugged immediately," the sweating captain said. "Expected to tell them to wait a minute and I'd put the Ambassador on. But they're not listening to us, just telling us. And there's a time limit. I would have had a line run to your suite if I'd known there was a time limit, but I should have known there'd be a time limit, I should have known how they act, all these races, because we're so feeble and stupid compared—"

The man almost was gibbering. The Ambassador slapped his shoulder heavily and stopped him. The Ambassador wanted a slap himself and his hand missed the first time as he reached for the loud-speaker stud.

The voice came instantly, so mechanical and uninflected that it occurred to him that a machine had spoken into a recording machine. The Venusians must be so unearthly as to be unable to manage Earth sounds, if they made sounds at all.

" . . . authority will advise him on the question of trade with Earth. He will be freed one hour thereafter. Your ship must remain in the same position meanwhile. The ambassador from Earth will leave your ship in precisely eighteen minutes proceeding directly downward. He will be picked up by our ship within the clouds. In this ship a representative of fifth authority will advise him on the question of trade with Earth. He will be freed one hour thereafter. Your ship must remain in the same

position meanwhile. The ambassador from Earth will leave your ship in precisely eighteen minutes proceeding directly—"

The Ambassador snapped the stud, his teeth gritted hard against a trembling. He was not even to land upon the alien planet, then. Not even to talk to the head of government but with "a representative of fifth authority." It was so condescending, so contemptuous—and so deserved, of course, he thought, staring at the captain who stared wild-eyed. You wanted to run. You wanted to hide. Already you felt them inside your mind ruthlessly peering, destroying. *As crazy as an ambassador.*

Contemptuous time limit of eighteen minutes! They'd been told that it took a minimum of sixteen minutes to get into a space suit.

"My suit! The dressers!" shouted the Ambassador. Remembering the Ten-year men who waited to reassure him, and badly needing one last contact—"Bring everything to the Earth screen!"

As he fled the room he saw, in the screen which showed Venus, a vast silvery ovoid lift momentarily to the surface of the vapor, then sink slightly and remain in a suggestion of menace neither in sight nor out of sight, waiting to engulf him.

WHEN he faced the Earth screen two expert dressers flung themselves upon him with the pneumatic pads whose donning before the space suit took care and time. In Center Room, all the perfectly sane, shielded men attempted to convey by smiles their confidence in the shuddering creature being lapped in weirdness. The Ambassador strove with all his considerable mental power to hold the impression of those reassuring smiles.

And that doddering fool, Hoag, with his one arm waving unwanted friendliness, said, "Ahoy Ambassador! Now we can get to the point of that story."

A story about superior merciless beings, calculated to break the last weak thread of a man's confidence! "Shut up!" the Ambassador wanted to scream across space. And would have, had not the dressers jammed his mouth closed, at that moment, as they adjusted a throat pad.

On Earth, too, they tried to shut up Hoag but they couldn't. "I'm not the old fool you think I am" he said. "Listen! Am-

bassador—gentlemen, High Privilege!—Ambassador," he said urgently, "I told you I've been saving this story to tell an Ambassador at the last minute when he's in the spot you're in, I've been waiting fifty years. Listen!

"The vermiforms made this little solar system and we didn't understand, couldn't understand. We got our liners replaced finally and no more than half of us were capable of standing a watch when we blasted off. Ambassador, we blasted the hell out of there!

"The vermiforms stayed where they were for a few seconds. Then they began to follow. We were streaming a good train, of course, the old fission train, a couple of miles of very fancy destruction and waste. So the worms came along. They overtook us easy. And they began to dance in and out of our train.

"Yes sir, Ambassador, they weaved and they circled in and out of that awful atom blast. And I knew that the atom blast will kill anything, chop through any armor. But not those worms! *Now* they showed us how superior they were! *Now* they made fun of our power!

"And I wanted to run and hide where my officer was hiding down among the mattresses we rigged for him among the girders along the keel. My mind was scarred by space and by everything that Earthmen were not born to—

"And then it happened."

Adjustments now had been made and the Ambassador could speak while the dressers almost threw him into the inner suit. His hand clawed his face and he said hoarsely, "For God's sake man, spare me!"

"And then it happened!" old Hoag shouted, thrusting away from those in the Center Room who were now trying physically to shut him up. "The worms died! They died in the atom blast!"

The Ambassador stared, and around the ivory table they stared at the last of the pioneers.

"Died! The vermiforms' natural armor was proof against all the rays of space and it held out against the atom blast for a quarter of minute. But then it went. One after the other they went limp and the blast spewed them backward and we could see the spreading holes in them. And then they were out of sight, dead, killed because

they hadn't known any better, by George!

"And we went on to Phoebe and got along better than anyone else with the things that sit inside their crystals, thinking. Got the platinum nobody else could take. Because we knew that the universe can breed morons, incompetents! The crystal people are smarter than Earthmen, sure. But at least we knew we were smarter than somebody else!

"Don't you see, Ambassador," the old man said earnestly, "that only the inferiority complex kept us from knowing right away that those worms were no better than children? They hadn't been trying to send us any message with radiations. No, it had been only the natural radiations of their bodies, changing as they changed their formations around us—as they *played*. One of them picked up poor Kroner. Why not? The thing was curious. Took him apart, later, the way a child will take apart a toy. My business with the square on the hypotenuse? Hell, how could they understand when they'd never learned any mathematics?"

"How could they?" the Ambassador echoed, and he was smiling.

"And that little trick of theirs, making a solar system. Well, don't you see that they had to show off? One of their natural functions is simply gathering and stacking together the scattered atoms of space. I'll bet they can't make anything but black balls of amorphous matter. It's possible they build themselves a little world here and there to lay their eggs on, or something. So, there they were feeling kind of abashed because they had no space ship or anything, so they just had to show us what they could do, and that they actually had gone and counted the planets of this system—on their tentacles. I'll bet, since they had more than nine tentacles. And wasn't it childish, getting together in the middle to show us a nice, glowing sun?"

THEY were locking the thorax section on the Ambassador. He stood straight and silent. Very straight.

"Ambassador," the old man pleaded over thirty million miles, "you don't *know* what you're going to meet on Venus. You don't *know* that they're particularly smart. And they don't know about you. Maybe they're a little afraid of you. Maybe they're a *lot* afraid of you. We don't know one way. But we don't know the other.

"But you know now," the best way and the best minute I can tell you, that some pretty dumb creatures live beyond Earth. Now, the way my grandfather's grandfather used to say, you wouldn't start selling your horse to a stranger by telling him that your horse is no good?"

Silence, then, on the beam from Earth to Venus.

The dressers began to lower the helmet over the Ambassador's head. He stopped them. "Wait a minute."

Still that nakedness in his mind, and the fear ready to pounce again. But that was only an effect of space, not Venusians. Or was it simply Lampell's heritage. A conditioning?

And that contemptuous message, with its almost-impossible time limit and its pointed refusal to allow him to set foot upon Venus and its "representative of the fifth authority." He didn't know one way and he didn't know the other, but it could be a defense mechanism on the Venusians' part.

In Center Room an old, old man had slumped in his chair, exhausted, reduced to crippled flesh that bore one bright, brave Earthman's eye. The Ambassador waved. The old-timer waved back eagerly.

"Gentlemen," said the Ambassador formally, but he spoke to the one adventurer, "I thought I was in a hurry but I've decided I've plenty of time. I think it will be a very good idea to open these negotiations by keeping the other party waiting."



Jonah of the Jove-Run

By RAY BRADBURY

They hated this little beat-up old guy. Even if his crazy cosmic brain could track a meteor clear across the Galaxy, why did he have to smash the super-sensitive detectors?

NIBLEY STOOD IN THE changing shadows and sounds of Marsport, watching the great supply ship TERRA being entered and left by a number of officials and mechanics. Something had happened. Something was wrong. There were a lot of hard faces and not much talk. There was a bit of swearing and everybody looked up at the night sky of Mars, waiting.

But nobody came to Nibley for his opinion or his help. He stood there, a very old man, with a slack-gummed face and eyes like the little bubbly stalks of crayfish looking up at you from a clear creek. He stood there fully neglected. He stood there and talked to himself.

"They don't want me, or need me," he said. "Machines are better, nowadays. Why should they want an old man like me with a taste for Martian liquor? They shouldn't! A machine isn't old and foolish, and doesn't get drunk!"

Way out over the dead sea bottoms, Nibley sensed something moving. Part of himself was suddenly awake and sensitive. His small sharp eye moved in his withered face. Something inside of his small skull reacted and he shivered. He *knew*. He knew that what these men were watching and waiting for would never come.

Nibley edged up to one of the astrogators from the TERRA. He touched him on the shoulder. "Say," he said. "I'm busy," said the astrogator. "I know," said Nibley, "but if you're waiting for that small repair rocket to come through with the extra auxiliary asteroid computer on it, you're wasting your time."

"Like hell," said the astrogator, glaring at the old man. "That repair rocket's got to come through, and quick; we need it. It'll get here."

"No, it won't," said Nibley, sadly, and shook his head and closed his eyes. "It just crashed, a second ago, out on the dead sea bottom. I — *felt* — it crash. I

sensed it going down. It'll never come through."

"Go away, old man," said the astrogator. "I don't want to hear that kind of talk. It'll come through. Sure, sure, it has to come through." The astrogator turned away and looked at the sky, smoking a cigarette.

"I know it as a fact," said Nibley, but the young astrogator wouldn't listen. He didn't want to hear the truth. The truth was not a pleasant thing. Nibley went on, to himself. "I know it for a fact, just like I was always able to know the course of meteors with my mind, or the orbits or parabolas of asteroids. I tell you—"

The men stood around waiting and smoking. They didn't know yet about the crash out there. Nibley felt a great sorrow rise in himself for them. That ship meant a great deal to them and now it had crashed. Perhaps their lives had crashed with it.

A loud speaker on the outer area of the landing tarmac opened out with a voice: "Attention, crew of the Terra. The repair ship just radioed in a report that it has been fired upon from somewhere over the dead seas. It crashed a minute ago."

The report was so sudden and quiet and matter-of-fact that the standing smoking men did not for a moment understand it.

Then, each in his own way, they reacted to it. Some of them ran for the radio building to verify the report. Others sat down and put their hands over their faces. Still more of them stood staring at the sky as if staring might put the repair ship back together again and get it here safe and intact. Instinctively, at last, all of them looked up at the sky.

Jupiter was there, with its coterie of moons, bright and far away. Part of their lives lived on Jupiter. Most of them had children and wives there and certain duties to perform to insure the longevity of said



Nibley raised a trembling hand and waved it at nothing.

children and wives. Now, with the speaking of a few words over a loudspeaker, the distance to Jupiter was suddenly an immense impossibility.

The captain of the Rocket Terra walked across the field slowly. He stopped several times to try and light a cigarette, but the night wind blew it out. He stood in the rocket shadow and looked up at Jupiter and swore quietly, again and again and finally threw down his cigarette and heeled it with his shoe.

Nibley walked up and stood beside the captain.

"Captain Kroll..."

Kroll turned. "Oh, hello, Grandpa—"

"Tough luck."

"Yeah. Yeah. I guess that's what you'd call it. Tough luck."

"You're going to take off anyway, Captain?"

"Sure," said Kroll quietly, looking at the sky. "Sure."

"How's the protective computer on board your ship?"

"Not so hot. Bad, in fact. It might conk out before we get half way through the asteroids."

"That's not good," said Nibley.

"It's lousy. I feel sick. I need a drink. I wish I was dead. I wish we'd never started this damned business of being damned pioneers. My family's up there!" He jerked his hand half way to Jupiter, violently. He settled down and tried to light another cigarette. No go. He threw it down after the other.

"Can't get through the asteroids without an asteroid computer to protect you, without that old radar set-up, captain," said Nibley, blinking wetly. He shuffled his small feet around in the red dust.

"We had an auxiliary computer on that repair ship coming from Earth," said Kroll, standing there. "And it had to crash."

"The Martians shoot it down, you think?"

"Sure. They don't like us going up to Jupiter. They got claims there, too. They'd like to see our colony die out. Best way to kill a colony is starve the colony. Starve the people. That means my family and lots of families. Then when you starve out the families the Martians can step in and take over, damn their filthy souls!"

KROLL fell silent. Nibley shifted around. He walked around in front of Kroll so Kroll would see him. "Captain?"

Kroll didn't even look at him.

Nibley said, "Maybe I can help."

"You?"

"You heard about me, captain! You heard about me."

"What about you?"

"You can't wait a month for another auxiliary computer to come through from Earth. You got to push off tonight, to Jupiter, to get to your family and the colony and all that, captain, sure!" Nibley was hasty, he sort of fidgeted around, his voice high, and excited. "An' if your only computer conks out in the middle of the asteroids, well, you know what that means. Bang! No more ship! No more you. No more colony on Jupiter! Now, you know about me, my ability, you know, you heard."

Kroll was cool and quiet and far away. "I heard about you, old man. I heard lots. They say you got a funny brain and do things machines can't do. I don't know. I don't like the idea."

"But you got to like the idea, captain. I'm the only one can help you now!"

"I don't trust you. I heard about your drinking that time and wrecking that ship. I remember that."

"But I'm not drinking now. See. Smell my breath, go ahead! You see?"

Kroll stood there. He looked at the ship and he looked at the sky and then at Nibley. Finally he sighed. "Old man, I'm leaving right now. I might just as well take you along as leave you. You might do some good. What can I lose?"

"Not a damned thing, Captain, and you won't be sorry," cried Nibley.

"Step lively, then!"

They went to the Rocket, Kroll running, Nibley hobbling along after.

Trembling excitedly, Nibley stumbled into the Rocket. Everything had a hot mist over it. First time on a rocket in—ten years, by god. Good. Good to be aboard again. He smelled it. It smelled fine. It felt fine. Oh, it was very fine indeed. First time since that trouble he got into off the planet Venus...he brushed that thought away. That was over and past.

He followed Kroll up through the ship to a small room in the prow.

Men ran up and down the rungs. Men who had families out there on Jupiter and were willing to go through the asteroids with a faulty radar set-up to reach those families and bring them the necessary cargo of machinery and food they needed to go on.

Out of a warm mist, old Nibley heard himself being introduced to a third man in the small room.

"Douglas, this is Nibley, our auxiliary computing machine."

"A poor time for joking, Captain."

"It's no joke," cried Nibley. "Here I am."

Douglas eyed Nibley with a very cold and exact eye. "No," he said. "No. I can't use him. I'm computant-mechanic."

"And I'm captain," said Kroll.

Douglas looked at Kroll. "We'll shove through to Jupiter with just our leaky set or radar computators; that's the way it'll have to be. If we're wrecked halfway, well, we're wrecked. But I'll be damned if I go along with a decrepit son-of-a-witch-doctor!"

Nibley's eyes watered. He sucked in on himself. There was a pain round his heart and he was suddenly chilled.

Kroll started to speak, but a gong rattled and banged and a voice shouted, "Stations! Gunners up! Hammocks! Take-off!"

"Takeoff!"

"Stay here!" Kroll snapped it at the old man. He leaped away and down the rungs of the ladder, leaving Nibley alone in the broad shadow of the bitter-eyed Douglas. Douglas looked him up and down in surly contempt. "So you know arcs, parabolas and orbits as good as my machines, do you?"

Nibley nodded, angry now that Kroll was gone:

"Machines," shrilled Nibley. "Can't do everything! They ain't got no intuition. Can't understand sabotage and hatreds and arguments. Or people. Machines're too damn slow!"

Douglas lidded his eyes. "You—you're faster?"

"I'm faster," said Nibley.

Douglas flicked his cigarette toward a wall-disposal slot.

"Predict that orbit!"

Nibley's eyes jerked. "Gonna miss it!"

The cigarette lay smouldering on the deck.

Douglas scowled at the cigarette.

Nibley made wheezy laughter. He minced to his shock-hammock, zipped into it. "Not bad, not bad, eh?"

The ship rumbled.

Angrily, Douglas snatched up the cigarette, carried it to his own hammock, rolled in, zipped the zipper, then, deliberately, he flicked the cigarette once more. It flew.

"Another miss," predicted Nibley.

Douglas was still glaring at the floored cigarette when the Rocket burst gravity and shot up into space toward the asteroids.

MARS dwindled into the sun. Asteroids swept silently down the star-tracks, all metal, all invisible, shifting and shifting to harry the Rocket—

Nibley sprawled by the great thick visiport feeling the computators giving him competition under the floor in the level below, predicting meteors and correcting the Terra's course accordingly.

Douglas stood behind Nibley, stiff and quiet. Since he was computant-mechanic, Nibley was his charge. He was to protect Nibley from harm. Kroll had said so. Douglas didn't like it at all.

Nibley was feeling fine. It was like the old days. It was good. He laughed. He waved at nothing outside the port. "Hi, there!" he called. "Meteor," he explained in an aside to Douglas. "You see it?"

"Lives at stake and you sit there playing."

"Nope. Not playin'. Just warmin' up. I can see 'em beatin' like hell all up and down the line, son. God's truth."

"Kroll's a damned fool," said Douglas. "Sure, you had a few lucky breaks in the old days before they built a good computator. A few lucky breaks and you lived off them. Your day's done."

"I'm still good."

"How about the time you swilled a quart of rot-gut and almost killed a cargo of civilian tourists? I heard about that. All I have to say is one word and your ears'd twitch. Whiskey."

At the word, saliva ran alarmingly in Nibley's mouth. He swallowed guiltily.

Douglas, snorting, turned and started from the room. Nibley grabbed a monkey-wrench on impulse, heaved it. The wrench hit the wall and fell down. Nibley wheezed, "Wrench got an orbit like everything. Fair bit of computation I did. One point over and I'd have flanked that crumb!"

There was silence now, as he hobbled back and sat wearily to stare into the stars. He felt all of the ship's men around him. Vague warm electrical stirrings of fear, hope, dismay, exhaustion. All their orbits coming into a parallel trajectory now. All living in the same path with him. And the asteroids smashed down with an increasing swiftness. In a very few hours the main body of missiles would be encountered.

Now, as he stared into space he felt a dark orbit coming into conjunction with his own. It was an unpleasant orbit. One that touched him with fear. It drew closer. It was dark. It was very close now.

A moment later a tall man in a black uniform climbed the rungs from below and stood looking at Nibley.

"I'm Bruno," he said. He was a nervous fellow, and kept looking around, looking around, at the walls, the deck, at Nibley. "I'm food specialist on board. How come you're up here? Come down to mess later. Join me in a game of Martian chess."

Nibley said, "I'd beat the hell out of you. Wouldn't pay. It's against orders for me to be down below, anyways."

"How come?"

"Never you never mind. Got things to do up here. I *notice* things. I'm chartin' a special course in a special way. Even Captain Kroll don't know *every* reason why I'm makin' this trip. Got my own personal reasons. I see 'em comin' and goin', and I got their orbits picked neat and dandy. Meteors, planets *and* men. Why, let me tell you—"

Bruno tensed somewhat forward. His face was a little too interested. Nibley didn't like the feel of the man. He was off-trajectory. He — smelled — funny. He *felt* funny.

Nibley shut up. "Nice day," he said.

"Go ahead," said Bruno. "You were saying?"

Douglas stepped up the rungs. Bruno cut it short, saluted Douglas, and left.

Douglas watched him go, coldly.

"What'd Bruno want?" he asked of the old man. "Captain's orders, you're to see *nobody*."

Nibley's wrinkles made a smile. "Watch that guy Bruno. I got his orbit fixed all round and arced. I see him goin' now, and I see him reachin' aphelion and I see him comin' back."

Douglas pulled his lip. "You think Bruno might be working for the Martian industrial *clique*? If I thought he had anything to do with stopping us from getting to the Jovian colony—"

"He'll be back," said Nibley. "Just before we reach the *heavy* Asteroid Belt. Wait and see."

The ship swerved. The computators had just dodged a meteor. Douglas smiled. That griped Nibley. The machines were stealing his feathers. Nibley paused and closed his eyes.

"Here come two more meteors! I beat the machine this time!"

They waited. The ship swerved, twice. "Damn it," said Douglas.

TWO HOURS PASSED. "It got lonely upstairs," said Nibley apologetically.

Captain Kroll glanced nervously up from the mess-table where he and twelve other men sat. Williams, Simpson, Haines, Bruno, McClure, Leiber, and the rest. All were eating, but not hungry. They all looked a little sick. The ship was swerving again and again, steadily, steadily, back and forth. In a short interval the Heavy Belt would be touched. Then there would be real sickness.

"Okay," said Kroll to Nibley. "You can eat with us, this once. And only this once, remember that."

Nibley ate like a starved weasel. Bruno looked over at him again and again and finally asked, "How about that chess game?"

"Nope. I always win. Don't want to brag but I was the best outfielder playing baseball when I was at school. Never struck out at bat, neither. Damn good."

Bruno cut a piece of meat. "What's your business now, Gramps?"

"Findin' out where things is goin'," evaded Nibley.

Kroll snapped his gaze at Nibley. The old man hurried on, "Why, I know where

the whole blamed universe is headin'." Everybody looked up from their eating. "But you wouldn't believe me if I told you," laughed the old man.

Somebody whistled. Others chuckled. Kroll relaxed. Bruno scowled. Nibley continued, "It's a feelin'. You can't describe stars to a blind man, or God to anybody. Why, hell's bells, lads, if I wanted I could write a formula on paper and if you worked it out in your mind you'd drop dead of symbol poison."

Again laughter. A bit of wine was poured all around as a bracer for the hours ahead. Nibley eyed the forbidden stuff and got up. "Well, I got to go." "Have some wine," said Bruno. "No, thanks," said Nibley. "Go ahead, have some," said Bruno. "I don't like it," said Nibley, wetting his lips. "That's a laugh," said Bruno, eyeing him. "I got to go upstairs. Nice to have ate with you boys. See you later, after we get through the Swarms—"

Faces became wooden at the mention of the approaching Belt. Fingers tightened against the table edge. Nibley spidered back up the rungs to his little room alone.

An hour later, Nibley was drunk as a chromium-plated pirate.

He kept it a secret. He hid the wine-bottle in his shock hammock, groggily. Stroke of luck. Oh yes, oh yes, a stroke, a stroke of luck, yes, yes, yes, finding that lovely fine wonderful wine in the storage cabinet near the visiport. Why, yes! And since he'd been thirsty for so long, so long, so long. Well? Gurgles, gurgle!

Nibley was drunk.

He swayed before the visiport, drunkenly deciding the trajectories of a thousand invisible nothings. Then he began to argue with himself, drowsily, as he always argued when wine-webs were being spun through his skull by red, drowsy spiders. His heart beat dully. His little sharp eyes flickered with sudden flights of anger.

"You're some liar, Mr. Nibley," he told himself. "You point at meteors, but who's to prove you right or wrong, right or wrong, eh? You sit up here and wait and wait and wait. Those machines down below spoil it. You never have a chance to prove your ability! No! The captain won't use you! He won't need you! None of

those men believe in you. Think you're a liar. Laugh at you. Yes, laugh. Yes, they call you an old, old liar!"

Nibley's thin nostrils quivered. His thin wrinkled face was crimsoned and wild. He staggered to his feet, got hold of his favorite monkey-wrench and waved it slowly back and forth.

FOR a moment his heart almost stopped in him. In panic he clutched at his chest, pushing, pulling, pumping at his heart to keep it running. The wine. The excitement. He dropped the wrench. "No, not yet!" he looked down at his chest, wildly tearing at it. "Not just yet, oh please!" he cried. "Not until I *show* them!"

His heart went on beating, drunkenly, slowly.

He bent, retrieved the wrench and laughed numbly. "I'll show 'em," he cried, weaving across the deck. "Show them how good I am. Eliminate competition! I'll run the ship myself!"

He climbed slowly down the rungs to destroy the machines.

It made a lot of noise.

Nibley heard a shout. "Get him!" His hand went down again, again. There was a scream of whistles, a jarring of flung metal, a minor explosion. His hand went down again, the wrench in it. He felt himself cursing and pounding away. Something shattered. Men ran toward him. *This* was the computer! He hit upon it once more. Yes! Then he was caught up like an empty sack, smashed in the face by someone's fist, thrown to the deck. "Cut acceleration!" a voice cried far away. The ship slowed. Somebody kicked Nibley in the face. Blackness. Dark. Around and around down into darkness...

When he opened his eyes again people were talking:

"We're turning back."

"The hell we are. Kroll says we'll go on, anyway."

"That's suicide! We can't hit that Asteroid Belt without radar."

Nibley looked up from the floor. Kroll was there, over him, looking down at the old man. "I might have known," he said, over and over again. He wavered in Nibley's sobering vision.

The ship hung motionless, silent.

Through the ports, Nibley saw they were based on the sunward side of a large planetoid, waiting, shielded from most of the asteroid particles.

"I'm sorry," said Nibley.

"He's sorry." Kroll swore. "The very man we bring along as relief computer sabotages our machine! Hell!"

Bruno was in the room. Nibley saw Bruno's eyes dilate at Kroll's exclamation. Bruno knew now.

Nibley tried to get up. "We'll get through the Swarm, anyway. I'll take you through. That's why I broke that blasted contraption. I don't like competition. I can clear a path through them asteroids big enough to lug Luna through on Track Five!"

"Who gave you the wine?"

"I found it, I just found it, that's all."

The crew hated him with their eyes. He felt their hatred like so many meteors coming in and striking at him. They hated his shriveled, wrinkled old man guts. They stood around and waited for Kroll to let them kick him apart with their boots.

Kroll walked around the old man in a circle. "You think I'd chance you getting us through the Belt!" He snorted. "What if we got half through and you got potted again!" He stopped, with his back to Nibley. He was thinking. He kept looking over his shoulder at the old man. "I can't trust you." He looked out the port at the stars, at where Jupiter shone in space. "And yet—" He looked at the men. "Do you want to turn back?"

Nobody moved. They didn't have to answer. They didn't want to go back. They wanted to go ahead.

"We'll keep on going, then," said Kroll.

Bruno spoke. "We crew-members should have some say. I say go back. We can't make it. We're just wasting our lives."

Kroll glanced at him, coolly. "You seem to be alone." He went back to the port. He rocked on his heels. "It was no accident Nibley got that wine. Somebody planted it, knowing Nibley's weakness. Somebody who was paid off by the Martian Industrials to keep this ship from going through. This was a clever set-up. The machines were smashed in such a way as to throw suspicion directly on an innocent, well, almost innocent, party. Nib-

ley was just a tool. I'd like to know who handled that tool—"

Nibley got up, the wrench in his gnarled hand. "I'll tell you who planted that wine. I been thinking and now—"

Darkness. A short-circuit. Feet running on the metal deck. A shout. A thread of fire across the darkness. Then a whistling as something flew, hit. Someone grunted.

The lights came on again. Nibley was at the light control.

On the floor, gun in hand, eyes beginning to numb, lay Bruno. He lifted the gun, fired it. The bullet hit Nibley in the stomach.

Nibley grabbed at the pain. Kroll kicked at Bruno's head. Bruno's head snapped back. He lay quietly.

The blood pulsed out between Nibley's fingers. He watched it with interest, grinning with pain. "I knew his orbit," he whispered, sitting down cross-legged on the deck. "When the lights went out I chose my own orbit back to the light switch. I knew where Bruno'd be in the dark. Havin' a wrench handy I let fly, choosin' my arc, naturally. Guess he's got a hard skull, though . . ."

THEY carried Nibley to a bunk. Douglas stood over him, dimly, growing older every second. Nibley squinted up. All the men tightened in upon it. Nibley felt their dismay, their dread, their worry, their nervous anger.

Finally, Kroll exhaled. Turn the ship around," he said. "Go back to Mars."

The crew stood with their limp hands at their sides. They were tired. They didn't want to live any more. They just stood with their feet on the deck. Then, one by one, they began to walk away like so many cold, dead men.

"Hold on," cried Nibley, weakening. "I ain't through yet. I got two orbits to fix. I got one to lay out for this ship to Jupiter. And I got to finish out my own separate secret personal orbit. You ain't turnin' back nowhere!"

Kroll grimaced. "Might as well realize it, Grandpa. It takes seven hours to get through the Swarms, and you haven't another *two* hours in you."

The old man laughed. "Think I don't know that? Hell! Who's supposed to know all these things, me or you?"

"You, Pop."

"Well, then, dammit—bring me a bulger!"

"Now, look—"

"You heard me, by God—a bulger!"

"Why?"

"You ever hear of a thing called triangulation? Well, maybe I won't live long enough to go with you, but, by all the sizes and shapes of behemoths—this ship is jumpin' through to Jupiter!"

Kroll looked at him. There was a breathing silence, a heart beating silence in the ship. Kroll sucked in his breath, hesitated, then smiled a grey smile.

"You heard him, Douglas. Get him a bulger."

"And get a stretcher! And tote this ninety pounds of bone out on the biggest asteroid around here! Got that?"

"You heard him, Haines! A stretcher! Stand by for maneuvering!" Kroll sat down by the old man. "What's it all about, Pop? You're—sober?"

"Clear as a bell!"

"What're you going to do?"

"Redeem myself of my sins, by George! Now get your ugly face away so I can think! And tell them bucks to hurry!"

Kroll bellowed and men rushed. They brought a space-suit, inserted the ninety pounds of shrill and wheeze and weakness into it—the doctor had finished with his probings and fixings—buckled, zipped and welded him into it. All the while they worked, Nibley talked.

"Remember when I was a kid. Stood up to that there plate poundin' out baseballs North, South and six ways from Sundays." He chuckled. "Used to hit 'em, and predict which window in what house they'd break!" Wheezy laughter. "One day I said to my Dad, 'Hey, Dad, a meteor just fell on Simpson's Garage over in Jonesville.' 'Jonesville is six miles from here', said my father, shakin' his finger at me. 'You quit your lyin', Nibley boy, or I'll trot you to the woodshed!'"

"Save your strength," said Kroll.

"That's all right," said Nibley. "You know the funny thing was always that I lied like hell and everybody said I lied like hell, but come to find out, later, I wasn't lyin' at all, it was the truth. I just sensed things."

The ship maneuvered down on a wind-

less, empty planetoid. Nibley was carried on a stretcher out onto alien rock.

"Lay me down right here. Prop up my head so I can see Jupiter and the whole damned Asteroid Belt. Be sure my headphones are tuned neat. There. Now, give me a piece of paper."

Nibley scribbled a long weak snake of writing on paper, folded it. "When Bruno comes to, give him this. Maybe he'll believe me when he reads it. Personal. Don't pry into it yourself."

The old man sank back, feeling pain drilling through his stomach, and a kind of sad happiness. Somebody was singing somewhere, he didn't know where. Maybe it was only the stars moving on the sky.

"Well," he said, clearly. "Guess this is it, children. Now get the hell aboard, leave me alone to think. This is going to be the biggest, hardest, damnest job of computation I ever latched onto! There'll be orbits and cross orbits, big balls of fire and little bitty specules, and, by God, I'll chart 'em all! I'll chart a hundred thousand of the damned monsters and their offspring, you just wait and see! Get aboard! I'll tell you what to do from there on."

Douglas looked doubtful.

Nibley caught the look. "What ever happens," he cried. "Will be worth it, won't it? It's better than turnin' back to Mars, ain't it? Well, *ain't* it?"

"It's better," said Douglas. They shook hands.

"Now all of you, get!"

NIBLEY watched the ship fire away and his eyes saw it and the Asteroid Swarm and that brilliant point of light that was massive Jupiter. He could almost feel the hunger and want and waiting up there in that star flame.

He looked out into space and his eyes widened and space came in, opened out like a flower, and already, natural as water flowing, Nibley's mind, tired as it was, began to shiver out calculations. He started talking.

"Captain? Take the ship straight out now. You hear?"

"Fine," answered the captain.

"Look at your dials."

"Looking."

"If number seven reads 132.87, okay. Keep 'er there. If she varies a point, coun-

teract it on Dial Twenty to 56.90. Keep her hard over for seventy thousand miles, all that is clear so far. Then, after that, a sharp veer in number two direction, over a thousand miles. There's a big sweep of meteors coming in on that other path for you to dodge. Let me see, let me see—" He figured. "Keep your speed at a constant of one hundred thousand miles. At that rate—check your clocks and watches—in exactly an hour you'll hit the second part of the Big Belt. Then switch to a course roughly five thousand miles over to number 3 direction, veer again five minutes on the dot later and—"

"Can you see all those asteroids, Nibley. Are you sure?"

"Sure. Lots of 'em. Every single one going every which way! Keep straight ahead until two hours from now, after that last direction of mine—then slide off at an angle toward Jupiter, slow down to ninety thousand for ten minutes, then up to a hundred ten thousand for fifteen minutes. After that, one hundred fifty thousand all the way!"

Flame poured out of the rocket jets. It moved swiftly away, growing small and distant.

"Give me a read on dial 67!"

"Four."

"Make it six! And set your automatic pilot to 61 and 14 and 35. Now—everything's okay. Keep your chronometer reading this way—seven, nine, twelve. There'll be a few tight scrapes, but you'll hit Jupiter square on in 24 hours, if you jump your speed to 700,000 six hours from now and hold it that way."

"Square on it is, Mr. Nibley."

Nibley just lay there a moment. His voice was easy and not so high and shrill any more. "And on the way back to Mars, later, don't try to find me. I'm going out in the dark on this metal rock. Nothing but dark for me. Back to perihelion and sun for you. Know—know where I'm going?"

"Where?"

"Centaurus!" Nibley laughed. "So help me God I am. No lie!"

He watched the ship going out, then, and he felt the compact, collected trajectories of all the men in it. It was a good

feeling to know that he was guiding them. Like in the old days. . .

Douglas' voice broke in again.

"Hey, Pop. Pop, you still there?"

A little silence. Nibley felt blood pulsing down inside his suit. "Yep," he said.

"We just gave Bruno your little note to read. Whatever it was, when he finished reading it, he went insane."

Nibley said, quiet-like. "Burn that there paper. Don't let anybody else read it."

A pause. "It's burnt. What was it?"

"Don't be inquisitive," snapped the old man. "Maybe I proved to Bruno that he didn't really exist. To hell with it!"

The rocket reached its constant speed. Douglas radioed back: "All's well. Sweet calculating, Pop. I'll tell the Rocket Officials back at Marsport. They'll be glad to know about you. Sweet, sweet calculating. Thanks. How goes it? I said—how goes it? Hey, Pop! Pop?"

Nibley raised a trembling hand and waved it at nothing. The ship was gone. He couldn't even see the jet-wash now, he could only feel that hard metal movement out there among the stars, going on and on through a course he had set for it. He couldn't speak. There was just emotion in him. He had finally, by God, heard a compliment from a mechanic of radar-computators!

He waved his hand at nothing. He watched nothing moving on and on into the crossed orbits of other invisible nothings. The silence was now complete.

He put his hand down. Now he had only to chart that one last personal orbit. The one he had wanted to finish only in space and not grounded back on Mars.

It didn't take lightning calculation to set it out for certain.

Life and death were the parabolic ends to his trajectory. The long life, first swinging in from darkness, arcing to the inevitable perihelion, and now moving back out, out and away—

Into the soft, encompassing dark.

"By God," he thought weakly, quietly. "Right up to the last, my reputation's good. Never fluked a calculation yet, and I never will. . ."

He didn't.



PLANET IN REVERSE

By HENRY GUTH

On that insanely jumbled world, their love was a solid fact. Yet he could only stare helplessly as she sobbed out on his shoulder, "Dleif emit desrever senutpen morf em evas!"

COMMUNICATION WITH Earth was out. Completely. Radio deader than a vacuum.

Darrel Bond allowed himself a grin. The fleet admiral had warned him against straying off the freight lanes. Had, in fact, threatened to break him down to a button-pusher if he did it again. That was a laugh! Button-pusher! What was he now, if not a button-pusher?

In the old days, space piloting had been something—a thrill and a challenge. But now—buttons! Ships so automatic that he

seemed to just go along for the ride. One man controlling a million-ton ship where it used to require a crew of fifteen or twenty. A lonely, boring business.

That's why he had taken over the ship and swung outside Uranus' orbit. Mostly to break up the monotonous routine. And then there was Neptune . . . The planet had been out of bounds ever since those geodetic expeditions had set out for Neptune over two centuries ago—and never come back. Early space patrols and search parties had been sent into that part of the

celestial sphere—only to disappear forever. The planet had become a symbol of the terrifying unknown. Eventually it was forbidden by interplanetary law to stray beyond the orbit of Uranus.

But why? There must be reasons for those disappearances. Who could resist an invitation like that?

"Some day," they said. "Some day. All in good time."

Now was as good a time as any.

But the radio was dead. It shouldn't be. It had a hell of a long range! And the gravity plates. Acting up. He should land somewhere and do a repair job.

Darrel looked at Neptune growing on the screen. He was getting close.

It stood to reason.

Neptune right handy . . . and he needed seventy hours or so to repair the plates.

Simple.

Funny about that radio though. All of a sudden, without warning or reason, it had gone dead. And the gravity plates, too. Then that strange, rending sensation when he was approximately halfway of the mean distance between the orbits of Uranus and Neptune. A strong force had seemed to grip the ship and wrestle with it for a few frenzied seconds.

Then the dead radio and the fouled-up plates.

But here was Neptune, bulging on the screen.

Darrel concentrated on his instruments—and began to check the ship's speed.

BEFORE venturing out the airlock, he made a superficial check of the gravity plates. Not too bad. He could probably repair them in less than the seventy hours he'd thought he would need. The radio was in flawless condition. He switched on the transmitter, and sent signals crashing powerfully out into space. But the receiver received nothing. Not a spark, not a gasp.

Might as well look around outside.

Outside, unexpectedly, there was a girl. So beautiful it was a physical shock. Raven-black hair, cream skin and a small, sharply-outlined figure clothed in a strangely translucent yellow tunic. An incarnation of delicate loveliness. Fragile. Unbelievable.

She stood about twenty feet from the

ship—waving. Waving listlessly and with an expression of infinite sadness on her face.

Darrel watched, dumbfounded, as the girl walked toward him hesitantly. Tears were glistening on her cheeks. Real human tears!

She kissed him. Soundly.

Darrel tottered and leaned against the airlock as the girl smiled at him sadly, wistfully, and then went off slowly, walking—backwards!

Darrel shook his head. Backwards! The girl strode along with uncanny confidence, not looking where she was going, until she stopped about twenty yards away and sat down on the ground facing him.

Darrel sat down too.

Hallucinations! He was space-happy! It had finally happened. Caroming around in space did things to people, mostly psychological things. The system's sanitariums were full of old space dogs who had cracked under the strain. They had seen and endured too much. But Darrel Bond . . . he was still young. He couldn't be cracking up now! Why he . . . hell!

This was no hallucination! The fragrance of the black-haired girl's lips was still on his mouth. It was heady.

He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

There! A thin streak of violet across the veins of his hand. Lipstick! It was unmistakable. A violet shade of lipstick. He put his tongue to the streak tentatively.

It was lipstick all right.

He rose to his feet and stared across the intervening space at the girl. She seemed to blend with the pale and rolling surrealist landscape of Neptune. His brain was reeling. This sort of thing just didn't happen. You land on an unexplored planet and, wham! a girl kisses you! No; despite the lipstick, it must be a dream.

And that walking backward. That settled it. People walked backward only in dreams.

Grumbling thickly, he reentered the open airlock. The thing to do now was repair the ship. Later, he would explore around a little and see what Neptune was like. If he recorded enough valuable information about the planet, maybe the Admiral would be lenient when he hauled him up before the mast for galavanting off with a Corporation ship.

Darrel hauled the wrecked plates outside the ship to work on them in the open. He could get things done faster out where there was more room to move around. The mysterious girl was still there, quietly watching his every action. He hunched deliberately over the delicate gravitation unit that bulged from the base of one plate. A hyper-thin vibrator rod had been cracked. But he could mend it.

He laid down his tools and paused in the work. Lazily, he lighted a Martian cigarette and looked toward the girl.

If she were an hallucination, why didn't she go away?

Instead, she rose and came toward him briskly—her jet-black hair contrasting vividly with her yellow, short-skirted tunic—walking backward.

Darrel scratched his head helplessly and watched as the girl, her back toward him, strode weirdly up to the ship. She turned about and smiled sadly.

"Lerrad, retal nruiter liw I," she said. "Noos, on I, gniveel ra ooy."

"What?" Apparently that gibberish was supposed to mean something. But it didn't.

The girl looked a little less woebegone now.

"Won trapa la," she said, and looked at the gravity plates spread out on the ground.

"That means nothing to me," Darrel said.

The Neptunian girl had turned and began to weave her way backward through the plates. It was uncanny the way she did it. She must have eyes in the back of her head! The gait was smooth enough, but it looked so strange in reverse. So damned strange!

Darrel followed her with his eyes. His spine was tingling. Like a hawk he watched her. She was a looker. The loveliest creature he had ever seen and . . . blazing comets! . . . she acted as though she were nutty about him, the way she smiled, jabbered and touched him affectionately.

But why the retrogression? Why was she operating like an old film being run off backwards in a projector?

Finally, the girl began to walk away again, her face toward him, placing one foot surely behind the other. She smiled cheerfully, waved, and then went on to disappear over the hill.

Darrel sat down abruptly. He glued his

eyes to the spot where the girl had disappeared.

For ten minutes he watched, but nothing stirred on the hill.

He noticed now that there were dim shapes thrusting up beyond the hill. They looked like the tops of buildings. A group of them. Probably a city.

Why not? The girl had to come from somewhere. But why the devil . . . !

He stared at the gravity plates on the ground. They weren't getting repaired this way. The girl was beginning to get under his skin.

The hell with it! He'd work on the plates now.

He began to whistle, shrilly and off-key. He always whistled when his lust for adventure was about to be satisfied. Neptune, defiance of the fleet admiral, a dead radio and blown gravity plates . . . an impetuous dream-girl . . . these added up to adventure.

Tomorrow he'd go over the hill and see what was on the other side.

A CITY was on the other side. A good-sized city. No more than a mile away. Darrel glanced back at the ship from the hilltop, shrugged and turned toward the city.

When he reached it he found a nightmare world.

These Neptunians were all crazy. Disregarding every natural law, they dashed about the streets backward. Every last one of them. And they stared at him as though *he* were a freak!

He stopped at a corner to collect his senses. Vehicles milled and rushed—backwards. At high velocities they slammed up and down the streets in reverse, a steady stream, in all directions . . . and without a mishap! Not a one of the lunatics had an accident!

He leaned dizzily against a metal post.

To steady himself he shifted his glance to immovable objects, to stationary things, to buildings. They behaved rationally. They didn't do things backwards. They didn't do anything but stand there, solid, substantial and sane.

Except the one across the street. The theater marquee was lit up brilliantly—and it was morning. He glared at it belligerently, as though it were playing a dirty trick on him.

The lights blinked out suddenly.

Darrel moved into the crowd on the sidewalk and went along with it—he forward and the others backward. It was mad! Everyone stared at him in open astonishment, as though *he* were the one who was going backward!

He came to what seemed to be a restaurant, and went in.

Over there, a waiter seemed to be beckoning. At least, he was pointing at him. Darrel walked over, his eyes on the astonished face of the waiter, and sat down to the table, already spread with food.

It was piping hot, very strange to the palate, but good. Darrel's appetite quickened. He ate hungrily.

Munching a piece of pastry, he looked up. He stopped chewing. The group at the next table was gazing at him with wide, incredulous eyes. He felt uncomfortable, and moved his glance around the room.

He stopped eating and stared. Not only backward but...blazing comets!

Fascinated, he watched a man come in the entrance backwards, seat himself at a table littered with dirty dishes and crumpled napkins and—regurgitate food back into the dishes! The food reappeared in chunks. The man manipulated knife and fork, and the chunks became one whole.

When the entire meal had been regurgitated into the dishes, and they seemed hot and ready to serve, a waiter came up and carried them all away. Moving backward, always backward.

Darrel felt nauseated by the unnatural process. He got up and left the restaurant abruptly. Wide eyes followed his progress to the door.

He moved with the crazy crowd that went back-side first. Ahead was a parkway that had normal, stationary benches. He would sit on one.

HE HAD BEEN sitting on the bench, watching this incredible world of retropulsion a half hour when he caught sight of the girl in the yellow tunic.

She came walking toward him backwards, stopped, turned, and smiled radiantly. She spoke, and her talk was the same nonsensical chattering.

Darrel blinked.

The girl had just been standing there, standing still, when a crumpled-up piece of

paper flew up from the ground and into her hand — magically. With a rustling sound, the paper opened in her hand like a flower unfolding. She held it out to him. There was writing on it.

It was intelligible. Darrel grasped the paper. Stunned, he read it again.

"I love you, Darrel," it said. "You have lost your memory of me by this time, I know. We understood this yesterday, you and I, perfectly. Now, as we are drawn further apart from each other, I remember and you do not yet know. Ours is a strange and sad union, Darrel."

It made no sense. None whatever. Darrel rubbed his ear vigorously. Dammit! There was intimacy in this note. It seemed to suggest that they had a mutual past and that he had forgotten it or—did not yet know. What did it all mean? He looked helplessly at the girl.

She was sitting beside him now, on the bench, writing, it seemed, on the sheet of paper he had just read.

He twisted his head to watch...and found himself staring in fascination.

The pen in the girl's hand glided rapidly over the page. Everything normal except that it began at the bottom of the page, moving from end to the beginning of the message, *erasing* as it went! One by one the letters and words disappeared under the swift strokes of the pen until the sheet was clean and unblemished. Then the girl placed it in her bag.

Darrel relaxed. "What the devil..." There! It happened again. A ball of paper, defying all familiar physical laws, leaped from the ground beside the bench and flew into the girl's outstretched hand. It unfolded as her hand opened, and she held it out, smiling sadly all the while.

"It is true then," the note said. "You have forgotten. I am Leyloon."

Leyloon? Leyloon? Her name, of course. Darrel strained to remember a Leyloon. There was no such name in his memory tract. He looked hard at the girl, at Leyloon. She was ethereal. He would *like* to have memories of her. He didn't though.

But he was *supposed* to remember her. Leyloon, Leyloon. No...his brain held no recollections of this girl except that yesterday she came up to the ship and...but *yesterday*, the first note had said, he had understood perfectly.

He scratched his head furiously.

Yesterday he had been more completely at a loss than he was today! He hadn't known of this city, where everything went in reverse, he hadn't known the girl's name ... he hadn't known anything!

The girl erased the note with reverse writing strokes of the pen. She smiled strangely, said, "Noolyel," and nodded.

Driven by inexplicable impulse, Darrel drew a pad from his shirt pocket and wrote on it, "Who are you?" and showed it to the girl, Leyloon. It was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous! Asking a question after it had been answered. But the inner compulsion had been irresistible.

He was silent for a long time. An hour ... two hours. Leyloon chatted gaily, even affectionately, in her strange tongue. She wrote incomprehensible things on pieces of paper that flew up from where they lay on the ground and from the waste receptacle beside the bench. She bewildered him, and yet ... Her every action was in reverse, but, despite the weirdness of the effect, hers were graceful and lovely actions.

Finally she left, rising to her feet and setting off down the parkway—walking backwards. She waved near a bend of the walk, then backed rapidly around it and out of sight.

Darrel returned to the ship. He weaved his way slowly and drunkely through the crowds of this crazy world going in reverse.

The ship was a lifesaver. It sat there as solidly as a rock. He rubbed his hand over the smooth metal hull and began to regain his sense of reality.

Over twenty-four hours already and none of the gravity plates was repaired. At this rate he would never get off Neptune ... that is, if he wanted to.

He attacked the job with more energy than enthusiasm.

THE third day began with two realizations. The first realization was that he was very definitely in love with Leyloon.

The second, that time here was moving in the opposite direction from the time-stream in which he existed. It was the only way to explain all these strange happenings. He had thought about it half the night.

It was urgent that he find Leyloon and

explain both these things. But he shouldn't go off half cocked. He was too excited to permit rational behavior, and might only confuse the problems which already were confused almost beyond comprehension.

With an effort of will, he lit a cigarette and dragged at it with deliberate slowness. When the cigarette was finished he threw it away and picked up his tools to begin work on the gravity plates.

He worked until he was calm.

Only then did he leave the ship, squatting in the hollow below the hill, and set out for the fantastic Neptunian city. How could he find Leyloon? The city was labyrinthine. It would be impossible.

But on the other side of the hill he met her. She was coming slowly up the gentle slope, backing up as usual.

Obedying an impulsive thought, Darrel moved twenty yards off the path and waited.

As though he were a magnet, Leyloon left the path and backed up to him. She turned then and exposed a face that was radiantly happy.

Before Darrel could collect himself to explain what was on his mind, the weird things began again.

The broken, shredded end of a slender cigarette soared up from the ground and settled in Leyloon's hand. A stream of smoke formed in the air, and flowed into her mouth. She put the cigarette to her lips. It glowed. She smiled and chattered gaily, nonsensically. Little clouds of blue-gray smoke kept forming unnaturally in the open air and flowing into Leyloon's mouth and nostrils. The cigarette grew in length with each inhalation.

Darrel stared. It was really incredible!

When the cigarette was whole again, the girl put a flaring lighter to it, and the tip went out. She placed lighter and cigarette in her bag.

"Whew!" said Darrel. "This is beginning to give me the creeps." He tried his best to grin. "What happens now, Leyloon? If my theory is right, we're going to back-track into your time."

As if in answer to his question, Leyloon began to back off rapidly down the hill.

"Whoa!" Darrel ran after her.

He felt all kinds of a fool walking that way. They faced each other, about a foot apart, she striding backward like some-

thing out of last year's nightmare, and he striding forward following her. It was the damndest sensation!

He wondered how she felt about it. If his theory was correct, then Leyloon thought *she* was following *him* the way he was following her.

To anyone watching, they must have looked like a pair of lunatics.

Here they were, existing simultaneously on the same planet, Neptune, but existing in time-streams diametrically opposed. While Neptune and all things of and on it were moving in time toward their youth and beginnings, *he* was moving in time toward maturity and death. But, paradoxically, each to himself was growing toward age in a normal manner. From either viewpoint, the other was growing or becoming younger with every minute. His yesterday was Leyloon's tomorrow, but Leyloon's yesterday was *his* tomorrow. The situation seemed hopelessly absurd.

Absurd or not, he would have to make the best of it. But it all seemed so senseless! Why in blazes was he going off on this wild-geese chase?

Leyloon was backing up briskly, only a foot or so ahead of him.

Maybe that was why. She was exquisite. It was a satisfaction to have her near, even though her world was all out of whack. And she was getting under his skin more and more every minute. A Neptunian nymph, possibly a figment of his erratic imagination, and he was falling for her. Like a meteor. He, Darrel Bond, cool, level-headed astronaut falling for a Neptunian myth with serene face and fouled-up metabolism!

Yes. He was. He had to admit it.

He followed Leyloon's tantalizing figure through the bewildering city. The swarm and rush of reverse traffic and activity made his head spin dizzily.

Leyloon turned finally, into a house. The noises of the city were suddenly cut off.

Almost immediately the business with paper and pen began. She picked a sheet from a desk and held it out to him.

"It is almost evening," it read. "I will go back to the ship with you now."

Darrel swore. They had just *come* from the ship!

With the pen, Leyloon erased the absurd message and fastened the sheet to the

gummed end of a pad with a rapid reverse tearing motion.

"Blazing comets!" Darrel exploded.

Her face radiant, Leyloon held up another sheet.

"Yes, of course," it said. "Have you forgotten already?"

Darrel stared at the page blankly. Forgotten what? Yes what?

WITHOUT conscious volition he took a part in the grotesque drama. He began to write on the pad he carried in his pocket. Leyloon peered at him strangely as he wrote, her eyes wide open and somewhat incredulous. He watched the words form under his hand, not knowing what they would be.

"Do you live here, Leyloon?" he wrote.

What a stupid question! He knew she lived here. Why would she turn into the place if she didn't? Why in the name of infinite galaxies did he ask a question like that?

Another sheet was being held out to him.

"Yes. You decided it was."

Decided what was what?

Nonplussed, he stood witness to himself in the act of writing, "But is it inevitable, Leyloon?"

Darrel growled angrily. Was *what* inevitable?

He wrote again, and as he wrote he saw an increasing fascination and wonder in the girl's eyes as she watched him. The rite was as strange to her as it was to him.

"Absolutely," his message said. "I do."

Now what? This was all meaningless.

"Do you truly love me, Darrel? Do you think there is a way for us?"

That did it! Now he was committing himself to all sorts of things like... wait a minute—as a matter of fact he *was* in love with this twisted-around Neptunian witch. No. That wasn't the right word. She wasn't a witch. She was more like a... hell! They would get nowhere with this question and answer method. It was too balled up.

Flat statements were what they needed. Statements that were self-evident.

He began to write down his theory about this paradoxical situation in which they were both entangled. It was pure theory, but to Darrel it seemed the only logical explanation of these weird events. That he

and Leyloon were living time-lines running counter to each other, seemed obvious enough. Within infinity there must be infinite possibilities. Since infinity was, in relation to time or anything else, infinite in one direction as well as the opposite direction, it was conceivable that corporeal objects could co-exist but in time-fields diametrically opposed.

Neptune existed in the opposite time-stream. The region occupied by this time-stream undoubtedly continued around in a ring corresponding roughly to the planet's orbit. The disturbance midway from Uranus' orbit would substantiate that. How far into space, away from the sun, the diametrical time existed, was impossible to guess. Its influence might extend beyond the solar system—or not. Who knew?

There was understanding in Leyloon's eyes. And agreement.

They scribbled and exchanged ideas well into the afternoon. Darrel felt an exultation.

Then annoyance, then discouragement. As the hours passed, Leyloon comprehended less until, as evening came on, she was openly incredulous.

When he left the house to return to the ship, Leyloon was watching him almost with astonishment.

WHEN the fourth day began, Darrel inspected the ship with satisfaction. He had worked on into the night and the gravity plates were all repaired. It would take only a few more hours to install them.

He reflected that though today was *today* for him, it would be *yesterday* for Leyloon. She would know nothing, absolutely nothing, of the past three days. They were her future. What would her reactions be on this day?

Not long after the sun had risen, she came walking uncertainly over the hill—backwards as usual — casting quizzical glances over her shoulder as she advanced.

Darrel was absorbed by the spectacle. He understood now—understood that actually, from Leyloon's point of view, she was walking *away* from the ship instead of toward it. This was the end of the day for her, while for him it was the beginning.

Leyloon stopped and turned to face him. She wore a helpless, puzzled expression.

It was disturbing. Darrel sensed—and the knowledge cut like a knife—that the girl was slipping away from him, sliding inexorably into her past. And in her past, he had no place. None whatever. He was moving to the point in her life where he did not exist for her. The idea was appalling.

She was holding out a note for him to see.

It read, "Night is coming on and I must retire, stranger. This has been an extraordinary day."

Stranger! So he was nothing more than that now! And only yesterday... or tomorrow... there had been complete understanding between them. They had been in love then, had told each other so! And now... stranger!

But there was evidence of a shy, hesitant affection in the girl's face and actions.

Darrel stifled a sudden impulse to swear and smash things. Every minute, every second they were moving toward Leyloon's childhood and her complete ignorance of his existence. It was horrible and it was inevitable. Frustrating. Infuriating! The minutes were precious, priceless, and they clicked by with the ruthless precision of a machine. They were going... gone, irretrievably.

It was almost noon—noon for both! Here was mutual ground. It was not one time of day for him and another for her... it was noon for both. They moved toward the moment from opposite directions, Leyloon from afternoon and he from morning. Exactly at noon, when time coincided for them... he would kiss her.

Smack!

His face stung from the reverse-motion blow. She had slapped him. But he hadn't done anything yet.

Then, he kissed her.

Now, when a slap might be expected, nothing happened. Because now she hadn't been kissed yet. She was watching him with bewitching, innocent eyes, utterly unaware that within a minute she would be kissed—or *had* been kissed.

She stared at him with a strange look, as though he were mad.

Darrel dug for a pencil and wrote desperately. He had to explain that kiss.

But it was hopeless. Of course it would be. Naturally she would think he was crazy

for writing notes explaining who he had kissed her when he *hadn't* kissed her yet.

He looked up, and Leyloon was gone. She was disappearing over the crest of the hill.

Darrel swore freely—eloquently!

THE morning of the fifth day—or was it evening?—Darrel riveted the last gravity plate into position in the bulkhead. The ship was ready. He could leave any time. There was a valuable cargo in the hold awaiting delivery to Uranus. So why the hell didn't he leave?

Because Leyloon was standing, obviously confused, on the slope of the hill outside.

They stared at each other a long time. Darrel's forehead wrinkled in a worried frown. Today Leyloon knew even less about him than she had yesterday. He must be a *complete* stranger to her now. This might easily be the first time she had ever seen him. Probably she had been out on a quiet evening stroll—it was Neptune's evening—and had seen the ship, and stopped to look at it.

Standing on the hill, half-silhouetted against the dusky sky, she seemed wonderfully desirable. So small, fragile and alone.

Making up his mind suddenly, he left the ship and approached the girl. Her eyes never left him. Undoubtedly she was dumbfounded at his backward behavior.

He leaned toward her. A stinging slap creased his cheek. It hurt.

"Don't tell me I'm going to kiss her again!" he thought, prepared to defy that possibility.

He kissed her.

Leyloon's eyes were big and full of fear. He hadn't kissed her yet but she must have been frightened by his menacing attitude. He scrutinized her face. It was thrillingly beautiful. But it showed no comprehension. No recognition. No faintest glimmer of affection. She did not know him.

Cursing all the planets and asteroids in the universe, Darrel swung around and threw himself back into the ship.

He sat with his back against the cold metal hull of the ship smoking Martian cigarettes nervously, lighting a new one from the butt of the one he had just smoked.

She had escaped him. Slipped into the past. He had ceased to exist for her. Five

short days ago he had stepped out of his ship and been kissed by Leyloon, Biff! Like that. She had gushed over him. His arrival must have been a departure in her eyes. She had been sad to see him leaving. Heartbroken perhaps.

But now she didn't know him from Adam. He hadn't even entered her life yet. It was all over unless...

Unless he could take her to Earth? No. Impossible! It would be the same farce all over again. Absolutely preposterous!

Maybe not. Why was it *he* hadn't succumbed to the time forces in which Neptune existed? He *should* have. Others had. Those lost expeditions, they accounted for the language and civilization here on Neptune.

Darrel lit another cigarette nervously, clumsily.

Maybe it was because of the speed with which he had approached Neptune. He must have ripped through the—through the point of time transition with so great a velocity that neither he nor his ship were gripped by the opposing time flow. If he had come at a lesser rate of speed, the change might have been effected. Even as it was, the ship had almost been gripped.

He threw the cigarette away and paced back and forth in front of the ship.

If he could take Leyloon out there... take her across the zone, very slowly, a crawling two or three thousand miles per hour... it might work. Her entire metabolism system might be reversed. She might exist *properly* in *his* time.

Blazing comets!

On the other hand, it might kill her. Tear her apart or something. How many members of the old expeditions survived the transition was unknown. The outcome was impossible to foresee.

It might kill her.

Darrel fumbled for another cigarette. And yet, he had to do *something*! She was receding into her past every minute. Time was desperately short.

The sun was setting—or was it rising?—and the night was coming on swiftly. The day was short on Neptune. Little more than half of an Earth day. He crumpled up the empty cigarette pack and threw it to the ground.

Kidnapping!

But it was the only way.

It should be relatively simple. Neptunians were a systematic race. They slept at night. All of them. When night came, all activity ceased. He would be unmolested as he went through the city...unless the girl raised a commotion.

Darrel rubbed his jaw. It couldn't be avoided.

When the night was black, he walked behind the beam of his torch over the crest of the hill and into the city.

TWO HOURS later he came up to the ship from out of the dark, carrying a limp form across his shoulders. His face was pale. It had wrenched his soul to knock the girl out. He felt like a murderer. Creeping into the house that way in the dead of night, finding the bedroom, the quietly slumbering girl, then...sock! It was the toughest thing he had ever done.

He strapped Leyloon's unconscious body onto the bunk in the cabin, sealed the airlock, and dropped wearily into the bucket-seat before the maze of manual controls. Beads of sweat oozed from his skin. He wiped them away.

The magnetic space-drive wooshed powerfully at an almost sub-audio level. Darrel glanced apprehensively at the girl. Her beauty and helplessness and the thought of what he might be doing to her, tore at him.

"If I'm wrong, I'll make it up to you in hell!" he swore, and declined the trip-lever beneath his hand.

The dark landscape dropped away rapidly. Within minutes, Neptune was a great mass on the screen, diminishing in size...diminishing, diminishing.

He wiped his damp forehead and stared at the instrument panel.

If she came out of it with a memory of the five days, she would be in love with him. Maybe enough in love with him to condone his socking and kidnapping her. If that happened, he would give up this fool freight-hauling. It was nothing but pushing buttons anyhow. He would spit in the fleet admiral's eye. Tell him to fly his own ships. Leyloon and he...

But what if she came out of it *without* a memory of the five days? He was taking her away before they happened, wasn't he? He was kidnapping a Neptunian girl who

had, in fact, never set eyes on him! How would he explain *that*?

Yes, how! She would probably hate his guts...and he couldn't blame her if she did. She would probably demand to be taken back. She...

The sweat glistened on his forehead. If that happened, it would be the end. There would be no point to existence now if...

He glued his eyes to the instruments. They were hours away from Neptune now. Nearing the zone. It was time to slow the ship.

There were vibrations. Clawing, clutching vibrations that began to insinuate themselves into the ship, into every cell and atom within that bubble of metal. Vibrations. They were ghastly.

But they couldn't be doing to him what they were doing to Leyloon. She might be undergoing a complete reverse in time. Every particle of her being constricted, twisted and battled over.

If she lived through it, would she know him? Would she know that...

His hands were slick with sweat. They slipped on the controls. Vibrations thrilled every cell of his body.

Then it stopped.

They were across, into the time-stream of the inner planets. Darrel set the controls with feverish haste for full speed, and switched them over to automatic.

He wanted to look at the girl, but couldn't. The possible consequences of what he had done appalled him. How could he dare such a crazy stunt? What if she hadn't made it? What if she didn't know him? What if...

"Where am I?" The voice was feeble.

Darrel heard it. An exultant grin began to creep up his face. They were the most beautiful words he had ever heard. They were in a logical sensible sequence. He could *understand* them!

His pulse hammering in his head, he willed himself to turn and see whether...

Leyloon was unbuckling the straps and sitting up. Struggling off the bunk.

Leyloon's face came up. There was a faint, tremulous smile on it. A *smile*.

Darrel whooped! He leaped across the cabin space toward the girl, slipped, and fell ignominiously to the deck.

Leyloon laughed.

SPACE TRAP AT BANYA TOR

By W. J. MATTHEWS

Exciting entertainment, these telecasts of dashing pirates, gorgeous victims and the always stupid Space Patrol, but Jeff Thorne, famed Derelict of Mars, was grimly bent on stopping them—in all their ghastly reality!

THE THREE PATROLMEN leaped to their feet, saluting as they arose. Bannerman, the Superintendent, extended a hearty fist.

"Welcome, General Wheelwright," he exclaimed, clicking his polished heels.

"Glad to be aboard, gentlemen," rasped the Inspector General of the Planet Patrol, returning the salute. His broad chest, scaled from throat to belt with the medals of twenty worlds, tinkled musically as he rumbled the brusque greeting. "At ease. Resume your game. Bannerman, a word with you, if you please."

As the Superintendent closed the black door behind them, he glanced apprehensively at his superior. The big man had slumped in limp exhaustion into the office chair before Bannerman's desk.

"Well, sir?" Bannerman finally asked. "Chain Lucas?"

"No," replied the General, hardly lifting his head. "Not yet." He stared fixedly at his glittering boots, cool runnels of light glancing along their polished curves.

"Senator Chanler is dead."

"Dead? Old Scrooge?" Bannerman's startled incredulity was tempered by a sudden enthusiasm he made no great effort to conceal. "Who poisoned him?" he inquired.

"Come now, Bannerman," replied Wheelwright, repressing a wan smile. "I grant you he was a parsimonious fool, but at least we managed to skin our appropriations through his committee one way or another."

"Skinned is certainly the word for it, sir" agreed Bannerman shortly.

"I'm afraid we'll remember Scrooge with regret," Wheelwright gloomily rejoined. "What the new Senator on the committee will do to the appropriation will ground half our ships."

"I had hoped for a relief," sighed Bannerman. "Who's the new man?"

"Chanler's daughter, Iris," replied Wheelwright. "Yes, yes, I know," he added testily as Bannerman's jaw fell open. "The girl's a reigning beauty, famous on half a dozen worlds. The World Council appointed her to fill the Senator's unexpired term. Just the usual courtesy, of course, but she flew back from Venus and threw herself wholeheartedly into the job."

"Has she long to serve?"

"She hadn't, but she knows publicity. Had enough of it, Lord knows. She ran for the next term and was re-elected."

"But she's wealthy in her own right, they say. Surely she didn't inherit Chanler's parsimony with his office?"

"Of course not, Bannerman. She's famous for her easy way with money, and her Chanler's daughter. Notorious, if you like. But the girl's a featherbrain, a romantic. Devotee of these gangster telecasts glorifying crime." Wheelwright's snort was eloquent of his disgust.

"I know. We get them here, too. Same old Formula Number One, the Robin Hood motif. Clean-living space-hawk raiding the lanes, confounding the stupid Planet Patrol, scattering his loot to the poor. Very true to life."

"It was corn five hundred years ago," scowled Wheelwright. "But it drags them in today." He pounded the arm of his chair. "Who believes crime does not pay when they can see for themselves on a hundred scanner-screens that it does pay, and handsomely? Of course it's fiction and they know it, but it tends to build up a subtle disrespect for law and the Patrol in their minds. What ruined the old Congress but the popular conception of them as a bunch of hick yokels stumbling over a job too big for their provincial minds?"



Dallia's head and right shoulder vanished in the searing blast.

These gangster things run in cycles, of course, but I'd like to see this one run out right now."

"True enough, sir," nodded Bannerman, soberly. "I've noticed their effect on the inner worlds. And you feel they influence the new . . . Senator?"

"I'd bet on it," growled Wheelwright. "When she was appointed, I slipped in operatives. You know how those household groups talk. And we know she had prejudices long before Chanler died. We've had to hold up two or three of her interplanetary junkets on that toy yacht he gave her, for her own safety, of course, but she's not forgotten. And she lived for years with Chanler's groans on the waste and inefficiency of the Patrol."

"Has she his power?"

"With her looks? More. She can block our whole appropriation or pare it to the bone."

"And you think she might?" Bannerman was grimly serious.

"She talks of cutting us down, trimming off the fat, she calls it. Back to the efficiency of the old pioneering days-when men were men and rockets were really rockets." He grinned wryly. "Between the screens and Chain Lucas, she thinks it all a big, exciting game staked against the daring outlaw. Romantic," he added.

Bannerman cursed. "I wonder how romantic those poor women thought it was when they were tied up to the 'Orion's' dice bar and beaten to death with iron bars? Or the seven we found cut to pieces in the wreck of the 'Pantagruel'? And the pretty ballad of the 'Stargazer,' her whole crew and most of the passengers pushed through airlocks into the void?"

"Horror retailed from eighty million miles troubles no one," replied Wheelwright. "She's a wild and reckless girl drunk with her own beauty and this new power, Bannerman. Undisciplined, she means to discipline us. She'll push us fifty years back down our own trail. We can't risk it, Bannerman."

THE Superintendent stared thoughtfully at his superior. He tapped his desk gently with the long Mercurian dagger used as letter-opener. "What do you propose, sir? You're not here for nothing."

"You can put that away," said Wheelwright, with some reluctance. "We're not romantic, Bannerman. We'll find a better way."

"Seizing Chain Lucas?"

"A month ago it might have helped. Now, frankly, taking him might do more harm than good."

"His reputation, I suppose."

"Exactly. I suppose he is the prototype of those telecasts we spoke of a moment ago, a daring buccaneer attacking on sight under our very noses, raiding but not killing, the most romantic of them all. Should we get him, the cleverest lawyers of the System would fight to defend him and we'd end up defending our own system against them all. They'd have our blood for persecuting the Robin Hood of the starways."

"Robin Hood!" sneered Bannerman. "If they could see Banya Tor!"

"Exactly," agreed Wheelwright, grimly. He leaned forward, tapping Bannerman's desk with a lean forefinger, his grey brows fierce over his bright dark eyes. "The one place Lucas slipped his men, let them kill for the sheer piratical joy of killing. We had nothing sure before, but on Banya Tor he spun his own death-rope. Nothing has been touched, as ordered?"

"Nothing, sir. The air-dome is still smashed where he drove his ship through as the Patrol came down from the hills. The . . . the bodies are still just as his butchers left them. Frozen."

Wheelwright leaned back, clasping his knee in its black and silver hose. His eyes fell. "I can't quite feature it. Perhaps he thought he could clean up the asteroid afterward; perhaps his crew just got tired playing Robin Hood. Anyway, letting off steam at Banya Tor is going to cut short Chain Lucas' career before many days are out. I've seen things on the runs we don't talk about, Bannerman, but those women hanged in their own dresses over fires . . ." He shuddered violently. Bannerman nodded.

"And the necklaces of hands and eyes Lucas hung on others before his men dismembered them by inches," he added grimly.

"Exactly." General Wheelwright bit his lip. "The man's cracked, mad. How many more atrocities we've found are actually his

rather than the work of lesser pirates we may never know. But to all the worlds he is still the wild, free spirit of Adventure. Knowing nothing of Banya Tor."

"As you ordered," pointed out Bannerman. Wheelwright agreed.

"I have my reasons, Bannerman. Knowing nothing of all this, suppose this Chanler woman could be taken to Banya Tor and shown exactly as he left it in his flight the true horror of this pirate raid, the real nature of piracy, the nature of the tin Robin Hood?"

Bannerman gaped aghast. "You planned that?"

"From the first weak call for help. I reached there about as soon as the Patrol ships and ordered the whole story on ice."

"You can prove to her it *was* Lucas?"

"Easily. They were there three or more days, loafing on solid ground, letting themselves go on the poor devils of the little colony. When the Patrol came in answer to a stolen radic signal, they had time only to fight and run, leaving everything. Two of his trusted lieutenants, known men, Revere and Pahboard, were found dead after the long-range firing when we seized the domes. We can pin it on him with a deadly certainty, Bannerman. We'll tar him with the blackest truth the System has ever seen. Sir Galahad will ride for a little time, perhaps, but he'll ride the calculating fiend we've known him and not the gallant adventurer these cheap telecasts make him out to be. And we'll fling the certain truth in Iris Chanler's painted face to do it!"

Bannerman was gravely sober. "Have you considered the consequences, sir? The girl has been carefully reared. She's wealthy, spoiled, but only a girl. In her revulsion from the ghastly sight you plan to thrust on her, might she not turn on us in reaction? Fling the blame on us for letting him commit the horrors she couldn't deny?"

General Wheelwright lifted an admiring forefinger. "Now that's the way I like to hear my officers talk, Bannerman. Consider all the angles, all the consequences. Follow no set plan blindly." He nodded in stern commendation. "Knowing the woman, I anticipated your thought. The Patrol will not lead her blindly by the hand into Banya Tor, Bannerman. She will be

steered there purely by chance, by a man not known to be of our force. A man above suspicion, above reproach, perhaps I might say above the law itself. Thorne."

He grinned wolfishly. "Call him in, Bannerman. You know his private line."

Bannerman shook his head. "With your permission, sir, I'd rather not. Even those men out there know him only as the richest man alive. That is his value."

Wheelwright was not impressed. "You know best, then I know him as a sot who stumbled on a Vadirrian cache and came out of the desert with more wealth than any man from here to the outer rings. The whole System knows him as no more, but for us it is sufficient that he secretly is a captain in the Patrol and ready to do our bidding. The Chanler woman and a party of her chattering friends are not an hour behind me on the incoming Martian liner for Vulhan City. Take me to Thorne and we shall spread our nets for the magpie if we have to use half his new-found wealth to do it!"

"MY FIRST assignment!" snorted in Geoffrey Thorne as he stood watching the dancers twirling about the huge white ballroom in the Government House. "Escorting some snaggletoothed bandylegs to a desolate little asteroid just to quease her fat little stomach. It's enough to turn my own."

"Patience, Thorne," smiled Bannerman, leaning quietly against a pillar at his side. "She's not bandy-legged."

Thorne stared, then laughed abruptly. "I needn't take your word on that, Bannerman. The General comes."

General Wheelwright, forging through the eddying swarm of dancers, glittered with gold and braid, but it was not at the great man Thorne was staring with such evident approval. At the officer's side stepped a tall, beautifully shaped woman in clinging Ionian spider-weave, her skin glowing brilliantly in the intricate patterns of the skin-tight gown. Her ebony hair, shoulder-length, bore a single brilliant jewel at the ear, but it was her eyes which held Thorne.

Grey-blue as a summer storm, they scanned him as she walked forward, a faint smile parting her lips at his open admiration. It was an approval he made

no effort to conceal, for Jeff Thorne, International, honored no convention against his will, nor had he need. His vast wealth enfolded him like a mantle, and few men on Earth or Mars or any other planet took pleasure in measuring wits or steel with him. Slowly he moved forward to meet the General, the dancers parting unobtrusively before him.

Many eyes followed him, a tall, commanding figure in the heavily brocaded white silk tunic, the broad golden stripe of the International still upon the shimmering black of his close-fitting trousers. Gold sparkled on chest and shoulders and jewels in the hilt of the short, heavy sword slung at his left hip in ceremonial homage to the first Martian colonists. In honor of these, too, was the crisp white turban about the gold-shot scarlet fez, symbolizing the blood they shed and the purity of the ideals for which so many of them had died. The five moonstones of the order of Larcanton glowed sullenly red on his broad chest.

"I hoped you'd be here, Thorne," the General greeted him, as heartily as though he had not made grimly certain the young man would attend. "May I present Miss Iris Chanler, Senator to the Council. Miss Chanler, Captain Thorne." There was a chill disapproval in the General's starched tones.

As they bowed and swept away in the ensuing dance, he joined Bannerman stiffly and stood watching the gay throng with an expression as dour as he could muster.

THORNE and the girl swung lightly in spiraling circles, fingers interlaced, in the intricate, graceful steps of the latest Venusian Glide Roll, the dancers melting about them in light-hearted disregard of all official dignity.

"A handsome couple, sir," nodded Bannerman.

"Handsome enough," agreed Wheelwright, clasping his hands behind him and following the two with brooding, stormy eyes. "Thorne seems to know his business."

He was promptly about it. As the girl melted into his arms, following his every lead with exquisite grace, he grinned down at her upturned, challenging face.

"I almost stayed away," he admitted.

"Because of me?"

"Had you seen the picture of you I conjured up," he sighed, and she laughed.

"And mine of you," she added. "I thought of you as a wrinkled old desert rat, hearing of your fortune."

"We wrinkle easily here on Mars," he smiled. "You'll not stay long enough to know." And his eyes, sweeping her lace-sheathed body, assured her she need not fear wrinkles at the moment.

She smiled. "We sail for Triton on my yacht tomorrow. There's just time for a visit to the Battan caves before I must return to N'Yott for the opening of the fall sessions."

"Those are dangerous parts" he warned. "Your party is very small."

"We have good men," she laughed, eyeing him curiously. "You know that area?"

"If I say I do, will you construe my answer aright?" was his cool rejoinder.

She rose to the bait. "Are you afraid?"

"I have been called rash ere now."

Her eyes glowed up into his. "Should I challenge you, Captain Thorne? Beg you to accompany us?"

His lips hardened and she felt the spring-steel body stiffen. "I am not on display, Miss Chanler. Not even for you."

Her smile faded and she drew away, moving from the hall out upon a deep-niched balcony overlooking the restless Nergal Sea and the nodding Martian ships swaying on the moon-dappled roadstead. The towers of Vulhan City lay about them, dark shadows in the ultramarine of the night, for these Martian cities were not air-domed.

Her eyes sought his, not lightly. "You think I ask selfishly, Captain Thorne. You are right. But not as you think. If I ask you to accompany me for a short cruise, though it be on a flimsy pleasure-yacht, it is not to exhibit you as some glittering prize of the light social whirl I inhabit, believe me. I know your story, of course. One of my duties concerns aspects of public health and I've a bill hearing designed to relieve some of the handicaps space-sick fliers labor under. You are living proof they can overcome the handicaps of disease or drink or drugs. I speak frankly, you see. Figures and charts put the Council nodding. Your name will not."

"I see," he slowly agreed. He looked

away. She had shown him the strength beneath her loveliness.

"You alone cannot abrogate the old laws forbidding t'ang addicts, cured or not, returning to Earth," he countered.

"I can try," she insisted. "I like this position, Captain Thorne, to keep it I have to earn my salary, and social legislation is the coin I pay into the treasury." She laughed, shaking her long black hair about her gleaming bare shoulders. "I have been frank with you, sir. Will you come?"

"You make it a duty," he protested. His slow smile swept her lithe beauty in the moonlight as the music rose again to draw them within the tall white palace.

II

BEFORE DAWN THORNE STOOD quietly on the airport basin, hands buried in the fur of his lined white jacket. As he gave the attentive stewards last-minute instructions for the care of his own space-ship, *Warrior*, lying in her berth not far away, he watched for his own party. Faint lines troubled his forehead.

A thin, gnawing premonition tugged at his brain. Something was wrong with the picture afforded him by Wheelwright. While admitting Iris Chanler's light spirits could mislead younger men than the crusty old General, Thorne had caught a deeper glimpse of the strength and determination beneath the lovely facade.

She came swiftly across the marbled plastic of the drome, her chattering party trailing her in a glittering swarm. Blood-scarlet in a short, daring jacket laced with white and gold, she struck lightly at his immobile arm.

"You Mars-men! Do you sleep?"

"The locks must be cleared for the Venus run within an hour," he shrugged. "The Lines wait for no one, not even estimable folk such as ourselves."

She presented him swiftly to her party, a gay, light-hearted parcel of touring socialites burdened far more with gold than either character or intellect. But he was welcomed pleasantly enough. While mere wealth might have lifted haughty lips, the stupendous weight of his tremendous fortune crushed all barriers and reserve. Nor was he less in his habit than the gayest, a blaze of green and gold beneath the ermine

fur. His boots were sheerest silver. Yet though the heavy gun belted at his thigh was crusted with gold, the ball and slides of the weapon were cold blue steel.

Iris Chanler, however, noted that he was wearing it, and wearing it low. When she rallied him on the precaution, he only smiled grimly.

"You may clothe a desert rat in cloth of gold, Iris," he countered, "But you cannot strip him of his Blandarc." He gestured toward her friends, each with the short ceremonial sword demanded by Martian custom. "Beautiful, but useless."

"Were they made for use?" She laughed. "On whom?"

"You might be wondering," he replied. "In your position. Holding the purse-strings of the Planet Patrol, you should fetch a thrifty ransom."

Her laughter was a beautiful thing to hear.

Her friends, crowding around as the party moved on the vessel they had decided to take passage on, cut him off from any deeper reply. Her yacht being under repair, they had been forced to content themselves with a regular interplanetary trading ship, and in the regulations and formalities of the take-off and acceleration he had no further opportunity for speech with his charge, save at the table. But the evening broadcast, a lurid melodrama of the skyways, gave him better cause to further his mission.

She herself brought up the subject, the starlight gleaming on the white synthetic of her long, pearl-strewn gown, no whiter than the sleek bare leg revealed by the deep V-split in the side of the skirt. Gold sparkled on her sandals and on Thorne's white tunic. The bloody moonstones throbbed sullenly on his broad chest.

"What fools we are," she said abruptly, pausing at the long dural-port of the gallery to stare out across the inky night at the gorgeous sparkle of mighty suns and distant stars winking in the velvety blackness. "Watching a childish sport on a paper screen when this is passing all unnoticed."

"They never tire," he agreed, leaning beside her, the star-shine harsh on his features. "Only we change, passing farther and farther each year into the distance out there. Someday we shall see those suns."

"Not you nor I," Her voice was low.
"Only the stars are immortal." He looked down at her. "We content ourselves with lesser things." She looked at him, then walked slowly on, not speaking.

THE long days passed. Hard, rough games provided exercise and amusement, since on these shorter runs between the inner planets and asteroids no suspended animation was necessary. The women were frankly predatory, nor did the men care to antagonize Thorne.

But he was better armed than even General Wheelwright had expected. Women had been no mystery to him since his sudden fortune, nor subservient men with sullen eyes. What the wise and kindly Martian fishermen with whom he had spent his outcast days had not taught him, the attentions of eager parasites had supplied. He was not lightly deceived.

So he entered into the games with frank and open zest, overthrowing the men and being thrown, kissing the women when necessary, and oftener, keeping both victory and defeat light with laughter. He did not seek out Iris, nor challenge her, but when it came to kissing her in the course of one of the Venusian games these cosmopolites had brought with them, he kissed her with considerable enjoyment and found himself being kissed promptly in return. It was a very pleasant voyage and he sincerely regretted that the time was at hand when he must divert it to the approaching asteroid dot known only as Banya Tor. He had not seen what lay there awaiting them, but he had seen other human wreckage left along the star-ways by the wolfpacks raiding interspatial shipping. It would not be a pleasant finale.

Iris and Thorne stood the morning of the fifth day out from Mars at a port in the small pilot cabin with two or three others of their party, oblivious to the ill-concealed resentment of the officers on duty. From the corner of his eye he noted the first tremulous quiver of the director-bar and his lips twitched. The game had begun.

Casually he herded the laughing young people from the cabin on the pretext of a fencing match already pre-arranged in anticipation of the expected attack. Andrews, his opponent, was a good blade and the

match drew most of the party and crew off-duty, as he had intended. The two ships coming up fast astern would be Bannerman's faked pirates and he intended their attack to lose no point in surprise to those for whom the effect was being staged. To insure it, he slyly broke the wires leading to the standard directo-gauge as they crowded noisily out of the cramped little room. Once Bannerman's ships were near enough to be spotted by the visual scanner, the slow passenger ship could never hope to evade the planned attack.

Less than thirty minutes later the brazen clamor of a bugle split the air of the lower deck where Thorne and Andrews were deftly matching blades before a shouting crowd. The silence that instantly dropped was broken by the glacial clang of alarm bells from end to end of the stubby little liner.

"Battle stations!" shouted Thorne, snatching up his gun belt from Isis. He seized her hand and bounded from the enclosed hall amidst the yelping pack pouring up the companions, snatching whatever weapons lay to hand. But the sight that met their eyes as they emerged upon the saloon deck, panelled with Vinite, struck the brashest of them dumb on the instant.

Fanned out to either side of the racing liner, two sleek grey racers of fast, if obsolescent design, whirled silently through the void. They bore a red sun on needle prows.

"You wanted adventure," Thorne dryly chided Iris. Her deep breast heaved and her hands were clenched, but there was no fear in her beautiful face.

"I wanted life," she retorted, flashing him a glance of impatience.

"This is Death," he replied grimly.

"They live on our trip," she laughed, seizing his arm. "We've been dead since leaving Earth, you Mars-crawler. I could kiss them!"

Thorne laughed aloud, flinging an arm about her. "They may afford you the opportunity, you scatter-brain," he returned. "We have no armament."

"All ships carry toss-mines today," she snapped.

"They are already abreast of us," he pointed out. "They're calling the Patrol by now, of course."

"The Patrol!" she scoffed. "Shiny ships and sleepy men! Rather an honest pirate than a butter-brain in black and gold!"

Her open sneer cut short as from the nearer of the ships drawing closer and closer abeam sprang a pink glow and a stabbing beam of golden yellow to reach out and gently tap the liner.

It rocked under the impact of the force beam and the steady, drumming roar of the engines broke unevenly. The beam snapped off, but the engines sputtered and gasped, throwing the vessel off course. Again the yellow beam lanced out, crushing the tall stern fans and sending the liner staggering drunkenly. Futile in her agony, she launched the tiny throw mines which were her only armament, but the sleek raiders easily avoided their slow trajectories. The throbbing engines were gasping and barking as the vessel rolled on her uneven course.

Metallic voices broke the frightened silence in which the huddled passengers watched the unequal combat. Over the intercom pilots spoke sharply: "Stand by. Patrol ship within sight, coming up fast. Hold your positions."

EVEN as they cried out in relief, the attacking ships suddenly arced upward and swung away toward Venus, their fiery wakes a long trail of incandescent crystal in the inky voil. Their parting shots missed the liner as she swerved on a new course to avoid just such vengeful rage, and a moment later they were lost among the sparkling stars. A sleek cruiser of the Planet Patrol swept by far astern, angling to cut off the fleeing pirates, but already too far away to more than frighten them from the prey they had already accounted theirs.

A joyous babble of voices broke out as the passengers reacted from their scared immobility. The liner was limping badly but not structurally damaged, and with that assurance the light butterflies aboard relaxed into their earlier gayety.

Iris Chanler, however, did not seem to so easily recover from the brief flurry of adventure which she had so ardently applauded. She was all Senator, and spoke with sharp feeling on the subject of the Planet Patrol and its many and manifest

shortcomings. So outspokenly angry did she become that Thorne almost hesitated to continue the planned routine, fearing to drive her through sudden shock into outright denunciation of a service which apparently could not prevent such hideous tragedies as lay ahead on Banya Tor. Wise in women, he made no effort to counter her fury, nor point out that if the Planet Patrol was undermanned and ill equipped, she had no one to blame but her own parsimonious father, "Scrooge" Chanler. He wondered uneasily if the scowling old miser had indeed returned in the more attractive guise of the lovely daughter.

When she learned the liner's rocket tubes had been so damaged she could not proceed to Triton, but must put in at the nearby asteroid of Banya Tor, she exploded furiously. Thorne blandly pointed out that this was merely a minor inconvenience in the romantic interlude of the pirates and all but had his head taken off for his pains. Her revulsion seemed complete, but he determined to continue the plan in which the faked attack had only been intended as a means of diverting the ship to Banya Tor without arousing her suspicion when she found what horror she had been led to witness. The iron was hot and he must strike quickly before her natural light-heartedness overcame her frightened wrath.

It was a race against time, for they were still two days out of Banya Tor the following evening and she had apparently recovered. As a lark, she and the other girls had taken over the galley and prepared the evening meal for all hands. It had been a surprising success and they were relaxing with music in the inner saloon when Iris rejoined them.

Switching from domesticity with her usual flare, she was enticingly cased in a long black evening gown sweeping to the polished floor. A cluster of Mercurian fire stars blazed on her deep bosom and there were others netted in the rippling waves of her dark hair. She brushed aside the attentions of her party and came to Thorne, sitting in the front row of the little group facing a blonde girl seated before them with a minature oval instrument on which she evoked sharp, wild music foreign to any he had ever heard. Seeing his absorption, Iris settled in a

lounge a little to his rear. He nodded, but did not speak.

From his place, he could see the deserted outer saloon and the wheeling circles of the passing stars. He paid no attention, however, concentrating on the lovely player before the silent group. But, as he glanced again through the parted leaves of the inner doorway, he froze in sudden horror.

The huge bulk of a space-ship, blotting out the stars, was already upon them.

Its ports glowed suddenly red, as though with internal explosions, and a wide cone of golden light sprang from her prow to envelope the unsuspecting liner. Too late Thorpe remembered he had not replaced the broken wires activating the directo-beam and the regular crew had apparently not discovered the damage. And the black ship rushing upon them was already not a thousand feet away.

Thorne's warning shout was never uttered. As the golden ray struck, the room was livid with its sudden glare, then dark and sullen red.

The girl with the musical instrument, cutoff in midflight, bowed stiffly forward and fell heavily to the floor at his feet. Her accompanist swayed sideways and toppled like a wooden doll from his low seat. A cold chill bit into Thorne, numbing him from neck to heels, but leaving his brain only too clear. Sodden thuds behind him as members of the Chanler party fell to the floor only confirmed his dread. If it were not the Avitt paralysis, it was a starker ray he had never known. A more dreadful fear which had been nagging at his subconscious for days bit deep and, as he turned his head with painful slowness, came to horror-stricken realization.

"Be silent, Captain Thorne," came a cold hard voice. "No sound, or you die."

It was the voice of Iris Chanler.

III

FOR A LONG MINUTE HE STUDIED her, over the barrel of the small Blandarc she had whipped up from the cushions of her lounge seat. And at last he saw what it was that had been troubling him so long. Her hair was dark and her color and figure warm and sultry, but the hard grey eyes were flinty pale and glinting. Killer's eyes . . .

"So you *were* a pirate, after all," he breathed, slowly.

Her icy laugh crawled over his twitching skin. "Did you think I had my wealth from my father's dribbling salary? He left me a better legacy, Captain Thorne."

"The family business, apparently," he returned, his dry lip twisting. For much was only too painfully clear. Her eyes narrowed, but she did not move.

"In a way. But I branch out."

"What's the deal?" he asked roughly. He had recovered full use of his faculties moments after the first paralyzing shock, but to her he seemed as immobile as all who lay sprawled unconscious about the saloon. If she had prepared for his partial resistance to the effects of the ray, due to the unusual condition of his t'ang-soaked nerves, she had fatally underestimated his powers of recovery. But he remained motionless. At the moment, helpless under her Blandarc, he could see the pirate vessel swinging along-side.

"Your friends?" he added, glancing through the door at the growing bulk of the raider. She smiled.

"My partners, rather."

"How do you work it, Senator?"

"As my father did, Captain Thorne. Years ago the outlaws banded together and made up an annual purse for the member of the appropriation committee who controlled the funds of the Planet Patrol. To obstruct and cut down the bill was his only duty. My father took it over from Senator Denton and I managed to take over from him after his death."

It was so simple. And had been so effective, hamstringing the Planet Patrol in its own bases.

"And now, open piracy. You destroy yourself, Senator. What does it get you?" He watched her, brows knit. She shrugged.

"You, Captain Thorne. Just you."

There was no need to explain. The wealthiest man since Croesus, an enormous ransom could well be torn from him, to say nothing of what could also be extracted from the families of the young folk lying senseless about them. And, in all probability, capping the situation with a trim jest, a tidy sum for the safe return of the excellent Senator Iris Chanler herself. It was very clever, and no less disturbing.

The liner quivered and groaned as the pirate ship hooked on, a black merchantman of latest design. There came the hiss of air and the clang of bolts as the pirates began to come aboard through the connecting airlocks. He looked back to Iris, sitting tensely in her deep blue lounge seat.

"Chain Lucas?"

"There is no Chain Lucas," she smiled, coldly. As he digested that startling remark, footsteps resounded along the passage and the saloon door was thrust rudely open.

Framed in the opening, a tall, raffish fellow in trim blue grinned at them. Iris leaped to her feet and ran to him, flinging her arms about his neck as he engulfed her in a bearish hug. Thorne took no advantage of their preoccupation, for several other hard-looking men in flying clothes were crowding into the room, gun in hand. As they began picking up the unconscious passengers and shoving them roughly back into their seats, the pirate and the girl broke their enraptured embrace and moved coolly over to Thorne.

"You really got him," he exulted, sallow skin glowing with an unhealthy tinge. He was not unhandsome, but his full lips had an ugly downward curl Thorne disliked.

"This is Captain Thorne," she replied, a certain pride in her voice.

"We're through, Iris," he crowed, clasp- ing her with one long arm. "Through."

"Through with life," agreed Thorne, coldly. He eyed the intruder arrogantly, his body motionless, his eyes intent. "Your name, you?"

The pirate leader sprang backward, releasing Iris his hand on his gun. "You turned your back on him, you fool, and he awake!"

Iris laughed. "Captain Thorne has a very unusual constitution, my dear. I did not trust the crystals entirely, but though he can move his head, he is as paralyzed as the rest of them."

Thorne turned a contemplative eye upon his erstwhile companion of the misdirected adventure. "I remember, you were our cook this merry evening, Senator Chanler."

His formal insistence upon her betrayed trust did not trouble her. "The yellow ray is entirely harmless unless the prospective

victim has certain mineral salts in his system. I supplied them in your food."

"Eating none yourself," he agreed. "A clever method. You had no qualms, striking down your friends for this gay blade?"

"They go to ransom, as you do," she replied, her lovely face hardening. "No friends of mine, Captain Thorne. If they accepted me, it was because I had money and position. I have no love for their silly kind."

The pirate chief swaggered forward, grinning. "Let us leave the moral questions for others, Captain Thorne, and speak of more solid matters. Solid gold, let us say."

THORNE balked instantly. Time was all he had left to play, aside from his unsuspected ability to move and his ruthless speed with guns, time for Bannerman or General Wheelwright to realize something had gone amiss with the plan to expose Iris Chanler to the bloody ruins of Banya Tor. He could have wept with rage at the futility with which they had laid their ingenious trap.

"If you refer to a ransom," he coldly replied, "I demand something better than the word of a flash-gun rock-trader like yourself that you have any right to hold me at all."

They gaped at him. "We hold you, Captain Thorne. Is that insufficient?" demanded Iris, teeth glinting between livid and unpleasant lips.

"You know what I mean," he sternly accused her. "You yourself told me you pirates had banded in this attempt to bribe and suborn members of the Government. As you well know," he added, his scorn dying her cheeks angrily.

"If this . . . merchant receives the ransom, how may I be sure twenty more of your association will not be instantly upon us for their share, if not for a separate ransom for all?"

It was not a worry which would trouble him greatly once the money had been paid, he knew, for neither he nor any of those aboard the liner stood any real chance of surviving at all. These people talked too freely. They would see none repeated their confidences.

"You misunderstand, Captain Thorne," Iris replied, her voice earnest with con-

viction. "There is no syndicate, no organization among us. Fifty thousand credits annually is the sum paid my father, and now myself. When all who feel they gain by sabotaging the Planet Patrol have left what they can on a deserted asteroid, the money is paid in at New Yott. There is no more than that to the cooperation I mentioned. There are no partners, no associates." She laid a hand on her companion's arm. "This is Captain Thomas Dallis," she added, with some pride in which Thorne took no pleasure at all. He eyed the tall fellow unpleasantly.

"The name is familiar. Export business?"

"Of course. Most of us," he added. A thin grin split his pale face. "So convenient to explain our unusual cargoes."

"Shall we do business?" wondered Iris calmly, seating herself facing Thorne on a lounge Dallis thrust forward. He slouched comfortably on the arm, watching the granite-faced captive. The other pirates had left the room.

"If we can come to terms," Thorne assented, quietly. "You say it will be to you the ransom must be paid?"

"Exactly."

"What of Chain Lucas?"

Iris laughed aloud, a mocking, airy sound that rang eerily through the silent ship.

"A myth, a shadow," she explained. "Some poor romantic fool we hired to play at pirate. He serves as the herring to draw across the train of Dallis here and others who really do the pirate's work."

"You hired him?" Thorne was frankly startled.

"Of course. He was sailing to and fro in a cape and mask, cutting out single ships, raiding mining camps, playing Robin Hood. But he was colorful and had made a reputation for chivalry we needed. We bought it. He continues these daring raids as before, robbing the rich and helping the weak, covering the real attacks by unknown pirates who leave no trace."

"Me," said Dallis, softly. "No trace at all, Thorne."

"Others cash in on the exploits," she admitted. "But it is Tom who pays him. A good investment, all considered."

"To show up the Planet Patrol?" wondered Thorne. "An investment in obstruction." He looked at her with dawn-

ing comprehension. "I begin to see," he added, slowly. "Those telecasts . . . your work?"

She smiled. "Of course. One of my first. I bought into a cheap little movie company and put out the first blood and rocket melodrama." A laugh bubbled to her red lips. "It made money. We expanded and started the whole cycle years ahead of its normal course. We still make money."

"You seem to have it all worked out," he said. "A normally apathetic public, soothed by a whole cycle of propaganda telecasts, a finger in the heart of the Planet Patrol, an honest, open business that takes you anywhere in the System, and a masked front man to take credit for the whole witches brew." He laughed shortly. "I suppose I can guess what will happen. Once you have the ransom you go respectable for good, leaving the unfortunate Chain Lucas to cover your trail and take the blame."

Both Dallis and Iris laughed, a merry, discordant jangle.

"Perhaps," said the man, rising to stand over Thorne. "But enough of Lucas. What of you?"

"How much?"

"Who knows how much you have?" Dallis ground out. "Set up half for us and you go free. We know half will be ample for any need."

"Then free these others," Thorne argued. "Their ransoms will be unnecessary."

"Nonsense." Iris rose and stood over Thorne, her breast heaving. "Ransoms for all, or there may be suspicion. The Council may pay mine," she added contemptuously.

THORNE did not laugh or move. Looking beyond the precious pair, at the heavy merchantman Dallis had turned into a raider, he sat amazed beyond speech as it slowly, silently fell away from the liner's airlocks and drifted off to starboard, its black sides crumpling visibly. A lifeboat, spurting from its little lock, snapped and broke as a violet ray from some unseen vessel above the liner cut it down. The pirate crew were trapped aboard and died there in soundless fury. The few aboard the liner were cut off from any retreat.

Neither Dallis nor Iris had noticed the loss of their ship, as sound did not penetrate the liner's hull. Thorne set himself to hold their attention until it should be too late.

"Break this paralysis, then," he growled, apparently making a fierce and unsuccessful struggle to move his arms as they lay along the padded rest of his deep lounge. "I can do nothing here."

"We can do nothing for you," shrugged Dallis. "Your body will remain paralyzed until it has absorbed the chemicals activated by the ray. Perhaps a day." He eyed Thorne in some admiration. "You withstand it very well."

"Thanks," said Thorne, shortly. It was not necessary to tell Dallis that he had withstood the paralysis so effectively nothing could save the exultant pirate should Thorne drop his hand the few inches to the heavy butt of the Blandarc he still wore. But the death of the sly-faced raider was the least of Thorne's desires.

"What is your own estimate of your wealth, Captain Thorne?" asked the woman, hewing as always to the main issue. He shook his head, remembering just in time not to shrug.

"Offhand, I couldn't say. It's not all liquid. The Vadirrian I retained to steady the market cannot be touched, of course, nor the foundations set up throughout the System for education and other purposes." He pondered a moment. "Say thirty billion on call," he finally replied.

They goggled.

Iris recovered soon enough. "Then let us call upon it, Captain Thorne," she enjoined. "We'll scale down our demand in cash. Half that sum would drown us in gold and criminals. We'll settle for six billion, share and share alike."

"Most reasonable, I'm sure," he agreed. "Will you still require the fifty thousand blood-money this fellow pays you?"

She slapped him, hard. "Remember your place, you dope addict," she snapped viciously.

"I am," he replied evenly. A black ship, ribbed with scarlet, was easing gently, silently into position at the airlocks from which it had blasted the pirate vessel. He could feel the gentle thump in his toes as she bit in and fastened her grips. The others, lost in wealth, felt and saw

nothing but the golden Midas sitting immobile before them.

"You've left me little else," he added, directing a cold glare at the man standing before him. "How do you mean to collect this ransom? The usual way?"

"As usual." Dallis' eyes were glittering. The red lips were parted, glistening. He was no longer handsome.

"And, once collected, what of these people? Your party?"

They glanced carelessly about at Iris' sprawled companions.

"They have seen nothing, know nothing," she replied. "Our ransoms will arrive together. We'll go back to Earth together."

"Dallis to join you later, giving up his hazardous merchant trade," agreed Thorne. "And what of me?"

They stared at him. Moment by moment the mirth and exultation died from their faces. As he saw the darkness descend, he knew only too well what would become of himself, what had been in their evil minds from the first. He could not be permitted to survive.

"I see." He was grimly calm. "I knew it all along, of course, but I wanted to see your faces. They're very expressive."

"What could you expect, you fool?" burst out Iris, taking refuge in anger. "Why did you resist the paralysis? Can we leave you at large to reach out and destroy us?"

"Then you may go whistle for your ransom," he snapped. "Shall I buy my own death warrant?"

HER face went hard and the full lips thinned cruelly. The blue eyes turned pale as ice.

"There are men on Dallis' ship who can change your mind, Captain Thorne."

"With hot irons, I suppose," he sneered. "You're a primitive sort of brute, Iris."

"We won't touch you, Thorne," interposed Dallis, coldly. "But we'll put these kids under the knife one by one until you sign." He nodded to the unconscious group about them. "Shall they deal with them as they did to the passengers of the 'Orion' and the 'Pantagruel' and a dozen others? It'd be slow and ugly, Thorne."

He looked from one to the other of them. Greed and weakness marred the

symmetry of their handsome faces, drawing down their lips in cruel, heartless determination that would brook no obstacle. They would not falter.

He was spared an answer by a thunderous bang in the liner's engine room. A second and a third echoed instantly, then a rolling crescendo of fast pistol-shots.

Iris looked back with a cry, her skin blanching as she flung up her gun, but Dallis only laughed uproariously. "They didn't all sample your wares, Iris," he jeered her. "The boys must have found some conscious back there."

There were no further sounds and she lowered her gun, smiling weakly. Neither saw Thorne's hand slip half-way down the lounge arm to pause directly above the butt of his Blandarc. But he had one more card to play.

"What of your own crews?" he demanded. "What of your dupe, Chain Lucas?"

The thin mask of restraint broke and the mean, naked soul of Thomas Dallis glared venomously at him. Even Iris stared at her boon companion in alarm.

"We take care of our own crews our own way, you fool! If you go, they go with you. There'll be no blackmailing us when we roll ashore, my friend, if that's what you mean. There'll be no one left. I saw to that." His sharp teeth gleamed.

Thorne was not perturbed. The panel door behind the intent conspirators, where Dallis had first appeared, was slowly inching open.

"And a like end for your other dupe, Chain Lucas," he contemptuously replied. Dallis grinned again, wolfishly.

"Of course. We'll wreck this ship and plaster her with evidence tying him with every piracy for the last ten years. The Patrol can hunt him down."

"He won't like that," offered Thorne, gently. Dallis swore in exasperation.

"Do I care?" he shouted. "Why worry over Chain Lucas, you gilded idiot?"

A beatific smile overspread Thorne's face. "Principally," he admitted, "because he is standing directly behind you, Dallis."

Iris' choked scream ripped the silence and her gun fell thumping to the floor. Dallis, half-turning, stared transfixed at

the tall figure standing quietly in the doorway, hands on the side.

IV

THE GOLDEN CHAINS WHICH had given him his name glimmered richly in the soft light, sparkling across his broad chest and about the rich black tunic. A black-masked steel helmet concealed the face no one living had ever seen.

For a space wherein a man might count to six, the guilty pair stared motionless at the silent Lucas. Then, knowing himself doomed, Dallis broke the trance and drew. To Thorne, sitting immobile in his self-imposed paralytic trance, it was like the slow-motion haste of a lumbering bear. Dallis, whatever else he might be, was no gunman, little though it would have availed him even had he been. Thorne did not see Lucas draw, but the heavy weapon was in the outlaw's hand even as Dallis swung, slamming its deep, heavy report from the recoiling slides. Dallis' head and right shoulder vanished in a searing blast, shivered to atoms, the gun he had never drawn spinning across the saloon. The hand and forearms went pinwheeling grotesquely with it to thud against the wall and fall to the floor in a hideous splash. He turned dizzily on his heel, a mockery of a man, and fell with a crash between two chairs where the paralyzed bodies of his own victims still sat motionless, blind deaf to his fall.

Iris screamed once, a shriek of horror and fury, then flung herself on Lucas. He wasted no effort, deflecting her blow with his left hand, his right chopping down with the whistling Blandarc to crush the long barrel against her temple, shattering her fragile skull. A mask of glistening scarlet shot instant threads across her livid face. She fell heavily, collapsing across the twitching corpse of her late partner, Dallis. The light gleamed on her outflung arms and upon the blood slowly running down their ivory slopes to drip more slowly still from her lax and impotent fingers.

Scorn tinged Lucas' whole bearing as he glanced across at the shocked and silent figure still motionless in his lounge-prison.

"You blind fool," he flung contemptuously at Thorne.

The latter did not answer for a long, slow minute. Then he nodded.

"So it seems, Lucas," he replied, quietly.

The big pirate shrugged, flinging back his long cape to holster his gun, and a vivid flower of scarlet bloomed in the doorway as the lining caught the light.

"I suppose they told you your paralysis is incurable," he said, walking forward with no further glance at his victims. "You'll be out of it by noon tomorrow. But now, just to dispel any fond hope you might be entertaining, Captain Thorne, you may consider your personal fortunes as unchanged. You are still for sale... to yourself."

"At what price?"

"Twenty-five billion."

"You raise the price?"

"Do you think I am one of these?"

Lucas sneered, nodding at the dead beside him. "Petty thieves using my name for a shield." He sat down, crossing his black-sheathed legs. "Now, Captain Thorne, let us discuss the terms. I am a busy man."

"And I am not," growled Thorne, angrily, staring full into the evil-looking mask Chain Lucas wore as the visor of his helmet. "I've had a hard day, Lucas, and I'm tired...tired of merchants and Senators turned pirate...tired of masks...Suppose you remove yours...General."

FOR a long, taut moment the outlaw did not move. Then he slowly unbuckled his linked chin strap, removing his steel helmet and the black hood within it. Thorne smiled wickedly.

"Good evening, General."

Chain Lucas was General Wheelwright, Inspector-General of the Planet Patrol.

"How did you know?" The outlaw's voice was flat, expressionless.

"Your voice. Your evident contempt."

"Well?"

"Why should I have suspected Iris Chanler? Did I know she was in your pay, sponsored as she was? Your tone implied me a fool to have succumbed to her charms, to have let myself be lulled into this fool's trap. But it was I who was to have led her into the trap of Banya Tor, and if I failed in that, who knew I had

attempted it save you and Bannerman? And your walk and voice are not Bannerman's."

"You guessed."

"I knew. Why I had been taken into the Patrol with my drunken antecedents all against me, why sent on this fool's errand? And who alone had authority to arrange for all that has befallen?"



Wheelwright nodded, his face impassive. "I see. It was I. All the way." He kicked idly at the dead foot of Dallis. "These poor fools never knew. They hired me as Chain Lucas to play the hero and be their shield in trouble, and I used them in their turn. I gave them information and the hidden routes of ships. I postured when I attacked, scattering my loot openhandedly, for the loot they stole was far surpassing mine and I knew the cave on Luna in which they keep it. I'll leave it there, I suppose."

He leaned back, a faint smile twisting the hard mouth. "It looked big once, Thorne. Big enough to kill for. Now..." he shrugged expressively. The golden chains winked brightly across his chest.

"Now it's a drop in a very big bucket,"

Thorne concluded. "What happens if I fill it for you?"

"What could happen, Thorne? You die. You all die. The ship vanishes, as others have vanished. Chain Lucas will be seen no more."

"You can't destroy or hide a liner, General. Your own Patrol will track you down."

Wheelwright shrugged again. "A high-orbit course, over the trade lanes, and I send the ship and you into the Sun. Will you seek fingerprints there?"

Thorne fell silent, watching Wheelwright from narrowed eyes. Finally he spoke.

"It's been your plan from the start, hasn't it?" It was not a question.

"From the moment Bannerman told me he had taken you into the Patrol, for all your record. I could have taken you at any time. But I wanted more than the ransom you can pay. I wanted peace in which to enjoy it."

Slowly Thorne's eyes widened. "You...you yourself ordered the massacre at Banya Tor."

"Of course. You should know by now, Captain Thorne, that my men do not get out of hand. They tortured and killed at my word, that I might have a spectacle savage enough to justify calling in both you and the late Senator Chanler. She came at the suggestion of the pirate Chain Lucas, planning the treachery you heard. She never knew how futile it was."

"A masterpiece," agreed Thorne, dryly. His hand had slipped loosely from the arm of the lounge and fallen to his side. His head nodded wearily.

"These two betrayed their friends, their country, and would have betrayed each other as they did us once the money was paid," he went on, watching the quiet bodies on the deck. A thin trickle of darkening blood runneled out across the magnificent carpet to stain Wheelwright's polished boot. "You know what you have betrayed, General Wheelwright. You live a lie even in your greater lie. You fail your own pose of mock-hero, grasping more than you can hold."

"I hold you, Thorne."

"I pay you nothing, you pirate!" flashed back Thorne, defiant even in his apparent helplessness.

"You haven't seen Banya Tor," snarled Wheelwright. "My men can change that tune."

"You lie," returned Thorne, coldly. "You killed your own lieutenants, Revere and Pahboard, merely to provide convincing proof you had caused the Banya Tor massacre. You destroyed Dallis' ship and crew and the men he brought aboard this ship. Would a treacherous snake like you leave any alive behind him to share the loot? Would you spare your own crew of cutthroats?"

GENERAL Wheelwright grinned malevolently. "You are very clever, Captain Thorne. And very daring. I could have used you." He shook his head. "Of course, none remain. Dallis' men are dead. My own died at mess, poisoned. Only I am left...and I am Chain Lucas." There was pride in his voice, a hard, brittle savagery rasping through the charged atmosphere of the littered saloon.

"You are a fool, General Wheelwright," replied Thorne, evenly. "I came to this assignment better prepared than you think."

"What's that?" Wheelwright leaned forward, his amusement vanishing.

"There are three button dictographs in this room," jeered Thorne. "There are fifty scattered throughout the ship to record Iris Chanler's reaction to Banya Tor, should she have desired backing out once we returned to base. My idea, Wheelwright."

"You hound!" cried Wheelwright, springing to his feet and half-drawing his Blandarc. "You threaten me?"

"Your own words convict you, not I."

Suddenly the pirate renegade thrust back his gun and flung back his grizzled head in a splutter of laughter. "What odds, Thorne? This ship goes into the sun and they with it."

"But we're not going into the sun," said Thorne.

"And who's to stop me?" demanded Wheelwright, laughing still.

"Myself," said Thorne, abruptly coming to his feet with a tigerish surge, the barrel of his gun leaping from the holster on which his hand had been resting, the lethal volt-ball at its muzzle square between Wheelwright's startled eyes.

Jaw agape, the General could only stare and stare, his hands lax at his side, and Thorne went softly on.

"You spun your webs too fine, Lucas. I told you, as I told Bannerman, I was cured of the t'ang habit. He believed. You refused to believe. Now you pay for it."

"You...you weren't paralyzed at all?" stammered Wheelwright, sheer unbelief still apparent in his eyes.

"My t'ang-soaked body did not absorb the catalytic salts Iris fed us," smiled Thorne, bleakly. "If I can no longer drink, neither can I be poisoned. Your cat's paw and his ray meant nothing to me." His voice tightened. "Enough, renegade! Your gunbelt! Unbuckle it. Drop it."

Slowly the General unfastened the broad gold buckle of his rich belt, his head bowed. Then, as he released it, he suddenly thrust up his left arm to free his black cloak, jerked the belt forward smartly, and clipped Thorne across the wrist with the buckle. The belt, weighted down by the heavy gun, was torn from his grasp, but it had at least knocked the Blandarc from Thorne's hand as well.

Snatching a knife from the lining of his cape, Wheelwright plunged forward with a snarl of triumph. He was all Chain Lucas now, all black-and-scarlet pirate.

But as he leaped, his own treachery rose up to avenge his victims upon himself. Thorne flashed out his heavy Martian sword...and Lucas stepped on Iris Chanler's dead and blood-soaked arm.

He went staggering sideways, slipping in the half-dried blood she and Dallis had spilled so thickly across the carpeted deck, and as he struck in vain at Thorne the Captain leaned swiftly forward across Iris' body and drove his straight blade halfway to the hilt between the golden links of the pirate's golden chain.

He did not die easily, Chain Lucas. Sprawled across the corpse of Dallis, he writhed and screamed, a hideous, bubbling scream of anger and fear. He clawed for the gun Thorne had dropped and Thorne pierced his arm to the bone. And when he managed to scabble to his knees, still wielding the knife, the Captain stepped forward relentlessly.

"This for Banya Tor," he whispered. And Chain Lucas, once the Inspector-

General of the Planet Patrol, died as he had lived, a renegade and a traitor.

SLOWLY Thorne sheathed his sword. He did not wipe it. He put his gun in the holster at his belt.

Looking down at the dead, he spun the jeweled dial set in his own massive golden belt-buckle. He lifted a tiny ball from the hidden compartment revealed by the opening and spoke wearily into the screen set in the polished sphere.

"You heard, Captain Bannerman?"

"Everything, Thorne. Everything." Bannerman's voice quavered and broke. "Unbelievable."

"I never thought I'd have to kill him." Thorne shook his head, "I never thought to see Chain Lucas dead at my feet."

"Where better?" Bannerman was more practical. "The Senator? Any hope, Thorne?"

He looked down at Iris. She was no longer beautiful, but her blood had doubtless saved his life. "She loved the romance of piracy, Bannerman. She's paid in full."

"I put her on the air, Thorne," said Bannerman, grimly. "Cut all telecasts from Earth to Pluto and every word went out crystal clear. The main bands are broken and the pirate cult forever discredited, Thorne. Lucas and his lieutenants wiped out." His voice thickened. "We can't give you a reward, Thorne. Not to you."

"I did a job. Not for reward."

"The Senate heard you, Thorne. Listened to Chanler and Lucas and the whole thing. The President called. The law's been repealed. You can go home."

"I don't understand, Bannerman."

"You're free of the ban, son. They say if you can cure yourself of the t'ang habit, as you just proved to every living one of them listening tonight, then they can cure the others who suffer with it. You lifted the law with your own hands, Thorne. You freed yourself. They repealed it not ten minutes since."

Bannerman's voice sharpened, rose abruptly. "We're sending ships. Hold the fort, Captain Thorne. You're an Earthman again!"

Slowly Thorne closed the sending ball. He stood tall and straight among the frozen and the dead. He was going home.

CONFUSION CARGO

By KENNETH PUTNAM

The hellship hung motionless in the cold black void. Men tiptoed along her echoing corridors, gun hands trembling. What menace gripped the engines? Who was this Dr. Sims?



Weapons coughed brokenly at the stern of the ship.

CAPTAIN ANDREAS STEGGO had commanded a light negship in the late war before peace and retirement had given him the master's position aboard the Sagittarian Line's *Reward*. He was big, slightly brutal and accustomed to absolute obedience from his crews.

On the other hand, the crew hastily

signed on by the Aldebaranian office were all ex-cargo jockeys of the twenty-five planet system thrown out of work by the sudden cessation of hostilities. They were rough, fast-thinking and terrifically independent.

Excepting myself, there were no passengers: The voyage was to be especially long

—two months; the cargo was particularly nasty—ten tons of stinking viscodium.

Anyone with half an ounce of brain would have known there would be trouble. Unfortunately the requirements for an official of the Sagittarian Line include a university degree and galactic license; nothing about half an ounce of brain.

First we discovered the viscodium, instead of being sealed in dellite drums, was stored in a large tank with an overflow lid. That made for economy in shipping space, but also for certain discomfort in such useful functions as breathing. I'd lie awake at sleep period thinking of what would happen if the lid fell off and the green slime came churning through the loose hatches.

Then one of the loading pipes developed a leak under the strain of acceleration. The *Reward* was an old ship and she had been hastily serviced for this, her first trip in five years. Brock, the ship's welder, burst the pipe while repairing it and we tossed him, stiff within the congealed mass of viscodium, through an air-lock. No second welder either; so when the plumbing . . .

After the burial service, a delegation from the crew visited Captain Steggo and accused him of negligence in not having the loading pipes inspected for residual viscodium immediately after the take-off. They demanded their protest be logged. Steggo had all five of them clapped in restraints. He then announced that full-dress discipline would be observed until we arrived; all ship's officers were to go armed at all times. I heard angry men in cheap *hwat* suits muttering after that about punishment half-meals and longer watches for a smaller active crew.

Mr. Skandelli, the chief engineer, visited me and offered a sawed-off shmobber. I looked at the foot-long weapon and declined. "Never touch the stuff."

"More than this may be touched before we warp in," he said grimly. "When Aldebaranian riff-raff gets snappish, I start using the armory. And passengers are classed with officers."

"That's no compliment on the *Reward*."

He looked at me, holstered the shmobber and left.

AN HOUR LATER, I was presented with the captain's compliments and asked to attend him on the bridge. The

whole business was beginning to annoy me more than slightly, but under the peculiar circumstances of my status I didn't feel like arousing any unnecessary antagonism. I went, determined not to be enlisted on either side—if it had come to choosing sides.

Steggo overflowed a huge armchair. A faint stubble covered his chin which, considering the cheapness of a depilosac, was unnecessarily filthy.

"Mr. Skandelli tells me you have no desire to be classed with the officers. However," he waved a huge paw to forestall my objections, "that's beside the point. You are Dr. R. Sims, late of Naval Research?"

"Yes. Robert Sims, physical chemist grade 2, Aldebaranian Project CBX-19329." I tried to keep my voice from quavering. This man wanted to bollix my papers.

He smiled and studied my questionnaire. "I am interested, Dr. Sims, in why a person of your standing chooses to travel on an uncomfortable cargo ship when the fastest negships and government cruisers are at his disposal."

"I am going home to visit my family whom I haven't seen in more than three years." I hoped my voice sounded confident. "Naval employees are not allowed aboard negships for matters of personal convenience. It would be six months before obtainable priorities would get me a cabin on a reconverted liner. Since my leave starts immediately, the *Reward* looked damn good."

Papers rustled as he held them up to the light. "The seal is genuine enough. Ordinarily, the matter would not have come to my attention. But remember, we are still traveling under the mercantile sections of the articles of war. After your amazing outburst to Mr. Skandelli—who approached you at my instigation, by the way—I thought you merited looking into."

"I told Mr. Skandelli what any passenger in his right mind would have. Having paid for my passage, my protection is in your hands and not in mine." I touched the door button. "May I go?"

"One moment." He turned his massive head slowly. "Mr. Ballew, bring in the prisoners."

Ballew was the astrogator. He was a thin fair-haired fellow who had been

hunched over his charts during the interview. He grimaced and left, returning in a few seconds with five men.

The first of them was the tallest man I'd ever seen, not excluding the captain. The yoke of the restraint on his neck barely seemed able to cover his body with its lines of force. His head was free to permit breathing, and the machine had been adjusted above his knees, enabling him to shuffle along in an odd, broken-legged fashion. The other four were likewise yoked.

Steggo introduced them to me.

"Ragin, whom I have logged as the leader of an abortive mutiny. The other woebegone gentlemen have names I either can't pronounce or don't choose to remember."

I waited, wondering how I came into this situation.

Suddenly the tall man spoke. The words seemed to come with difficulty because of the restraint pressing upon his diaphragm. "You'll remember us, Steggo, if I have to hunt your black heart across the galaxy."

The captain smiled. "A shmobbler squad on earth will quiet you. And it will be shmobbers for you after my report is in."

Ragin glared and shuffled rapidly across the small room. His intention was obviously to hurl himself against the captain. Steggo lurched out of his chair and placed it in front of the moving man. Ragin hit the chair, bounced off it and was hurled against a bulkhead. I heard the thud as his head smashed into metal. The astrogator helped him to his feet.

"That, too, will go into the log," Steggo puffed. "Now, Dr. Sims, if you will please come this way."

I followed him, disagreeably conscious of the murder thoughts swirling about in the bridge.

He walked to the ship's visor, fiddled with the dial and snapped it on. I gasped.

"That as you see is the hold. I was looking through at the hold where our Mr. Ragin and his little playmates were being kept. I thought I saw somebody bending over Ragin, feeding him. Mr. Skandelli was sent to investigate with the second officer and my suspicions were proven correct. The ship was then searched and six others found. Five of these are the wives of these men here; two belong to other

members of the crew who are now being placed in restraints themselves."

"Women!" I muttered. "Aboard a ship. Stowaways!"

"Ah, you are familiar with the mercantile sections of the articles of war. 'Any person of the feminine gender found aboard a ship engaged in interstellar flight without naval or military guard shall be subject to death or such other punishment as a court martial may direct.' That is the law, is it not?"

"But captain," I protested. "That law was directed against members of the Fino Feminist League who cooperated with the enemy during the war. It has never been used against civilians."

"Which is not to say it does not apply to civilians. I am fully aware that women have participated in our government during the entire conflict and even served with distinction during the Battle of the Dead Star. But the law is specific. It considers the costly sabotage at the time we were attacked and forbids women aboard ships on a blanket basis."

His heavy face seemed unusually thoughtful. He snapped off the visor.

"What do you want me to do?"

He pointed to the open log. "I've entered the entire incident; the fact that these men and two others, prior to the attempt at mutiny, did willfully smuggle their wives on board, in knowing violation by all parties concerned of space law." Ragin snorted heavily in the background. "I want you to sign the entry, testifying to the physical presence on ship of these women."

"But I'm not an officer. I'm not even an employee of the line!"

"That is precisely why I want your signature. It provides disinterested evidence. If you refuse, in the light of the emergency conditions now revealed as well as your semi-official naval status, I shall be forced to conclude you favor the mutinous elements. You will then be placed—"

He didn't have to finish. I signed.

STEGGO followed me courteously to the door. "Thank you, Dr. Sims. Mr. Ballew, please assemble the court martial."

Ballew had turned a fiery red. "But, sir, you aren't going to court-martial them before we reach earth!"

"I am, Mr. Ballew. And you will sit on

the court. Remember the mercantile sections: 'any merchant ship in priority categories 1AA, 1AB or 1AC whether proceeding with or without military or naval escort shall be considered to be on military or naval status for the purpose of discipline at the discretion of the master.' A viscodium cargo is sufficiently delicate to place us in category 1AC. And our dendro drive prohibits radio communication even if a ship this size carried an interstellar transmitter, which it doesn't. Please assemble the court."

As Ballew, breathing hard, hurried from the bridge, I thought of what a space lawyer we had for a captain. He'd probably been an administration officer until near the end when the bottom of the barrel was carefully scraped. Early retirement usually pointed to such a background. Kid discipline, himself!

"You appreciate the fact, captain, that the priority categories as well as the mercantile sections which you quote so glibly were all wartime measures?"

"I do. Wartime measures which have not yet been repealed. Now, Dr. Sims, if you would return to your cabin?"

I left, trying to throw some ocular comfort at Ragin while the door closed behind me. He was staring at my parplex jumper oddly, his brows knitted as if he were trying to decide something very important. I was wearing the naval *pi* with three palms.

My cabin had been searched. Officers or crew? I didn't know. It was no fun being a neutral, as many small and sorrowful planets have discovered.

The suitcase and toilet articles had been hastily rifled, clumsily put back into place. I felt the head of the bed. The invisible blusterbun still reposed on the head of the ledge. Obviously no search scanners or even colored powder had been employed.

Amateurs. A stелlective would have used powder, at least.

I pocketed the tiny, completely transparent weapon and stretched out on the bed. My toilet articles caught my eye. The half-empty container of depilo-sac had been probed for hidden articles. White drippings of the stuff stained the red shelf. Well, they hadn't found anything there.

Nothing incriminating had been found in the suitcase either; I had selected its contents with great care. Rather a nice

touch that, choosing something old-fashioned like a suitcase instead of a modern space-saving collapsicon.

But if this mess got down to really sharp brass tacks, all my precautions wouldn't be worth a gram of plutonium in an atomic furnace. Damn Steggo anyway. Damn him and his mercantile sections. Damn Ragin. Damn the war.

I fell asleep in a wave of homesickness for the earth.

WEAPONS coughed brokenly at the stern of the ship. I came awake with my hand on the blusterbun. Somebody ran past my cabin screaming. The lights went off, came back on, then went off again.

I hit the floor of the bed as my pneumatic mattress was turned off too. Something rattled against the outside bulkhead and passed down the spaceship. Meteor dust? Not this far out. Probably Steggo turning on the gas sprinkler system. Or the mutineers.

So this was a mutiny. I had been in an atomic explosion and a devastating space negation in my time. I had been in the photonite plant on Rigel VIII when molecular joint lubricant was spilled against the dome, allowing our air to leak out into space. Now I was in a mutiny.

Fingers tapped on my door in a frantic message. I threw it open.

The man lying outside was evidently a crew member. He had a gaping, smoking hole instead of his chest.

"Jobal!" he almost whispered. "Please, please Jobal—" He seemed to belch; when he didn't move I realized it was a death rattle. I moved his hand gently and closed the door. I went back to the side-board of the bed and sat down.

Who was Jobal? A friend? His wife, sweetheart? One of his gods? I must have sat in the darkness for an hour. After a while I noticed the ship was silent again. There was only the rolling hum of the Dendros.

Footsteps became louder and stopped outside my door. There was the sound of a man stepping over the body. Then the door was flung open and two huge Aldebaranians strode in. They leveled still-throbbing shmobbars at my waist.

"Captain Ragin wants to see you."

Uh-huh. So the score was in. And now,

I imagined, all bets were being paid. And which side was I supposed to be on? I walked carelessly to the door, keeping the pocket in which I had the blusterbun away from them.

RAGIN sat in Steggo's chair. He didn't fill it as completely, but he looked just as dominant as the captain. Ballew pored over his charts in a corner. Except for the splash of blood on the floor, the room was as I had left it.

"Hello, Dr. Sims," Ragin grinned through puffed lips. Ballew didn't look up. "Some changes been made."

"For the better, I hope." I waited. This might be played a number of ways.

"Yeah. We think so." He looked behind me at my guards. "He's been searched?"

"Well—" one of them began.

"We didn't think—" the other fumbled.

"Great exploding novas! What do you blastheads think this is—a meeting of the Aldebaranian Benevolent Association?" He was on his feet snarling at them, his head almost two feet above mine.

"I can save you the trouble—er, captain." I flipped the blusterbun from my pocket and held it out, butt foremost.

He stared uncomprehendingly at my outstretched hand for a few moments. Then he reached forward gingerly and took the invisible weapon.

A smile twisted his mouth as he ran his fingers over its intricacies. "Well, I'll be washed by a comet's tail! A blusterbun! Dainty and deadly. I've heard about these things but I never hoped to have one. How does a civilian rate it?"

"Naval research," I reminded him.

Coolly, he appraised me. "Maybe. Maybe not. I'll still have to have you searched." The guards came up.

I moved away. "Now, wait a moment. I gave you my weapon. Had I wanted to, I could have shot you with the same motion before your zombie friends decided to swallow or wipe their mouths. I carry documents on my person that I most definitely don't want seen until I reach earth. Unless I'm mistaken, you want some favor of me. If you read those documents, all deals are automatically off; and you'll be in a mess about five times as disagreeable as a mutiny."

He took time to chew on that. Finally:

"O. K. Not that you can kill more than one man even if you have another weapon. If you start shooting, you'll be thoroughly butchered. And we do want a good deed out of you."

A tall, blonde woman came in with a tray. She prodded me with it. Catching on, I took a cup of hot liquid, Aldebaranian *hialian juice*. Things were looking up.

"Elsa and I were just married. I wasn't going to leave her to the tender mercies of a fat sadist. The boys were all for mutiny thirty-six hours after we cleared Booma City, but I held them down until our wives were discovered. We've been miners and independent freightmen; we're not used to this sort of disciplinary guff."

My chin pointed at the red mess on the floor. "Steggo?"

"No. One of our boys. We've been careful to keep this a completely bloodless mutiny as far as the officers were concerned. As a result, there've been more casualties on our side than there should have been. We lost four men."

"Five," one of my guards broke in. "There was another stiff outside this guy's cabin. Couldn't see in the dark, but it felt like Rildek."

Ragin nodded. "Five, then. We'll have a roll call after we get the power turned back on. Running the ship on auxiliaries now. Now what I want you to do, doctor, is sign a document testifying to the background of the mutiny as you know it, as well as an affidavit stating that when last seen by you Steggo and his officers were all alive and in as good condition as could be expected."

"If I see them in that state, I will."

"You will. We're letting them go in a small life-boat, with enough to last until they reach a base. If you want to, you may join them. This is a mutinous ship."

"No, thank you." I tried to sound casual. "I'll stay here."

He studied me. "I thought you'd say that. There's something terrifically phony about you, doctor, but I don't have time to figure it out."

I smiled. "I'm grateful for your lack of time." Then I put my cup on the floor. "But your word on this. I can take your word, because the fact you didn't kill Steggo and his officers indicates that you don't intend to turn pirate. Whatever your plans may be, will you tell me on your honor that

you will see to it that I eventually reach earth or earth's authority?"

He pumped my hand in a pulverizing grip. "Word of honor. On my honor as a—a mutineer." We both grinned.

On the way to the air-lock, the man behind me suddenly pushed his shmobber into my back. Startled, I stopped.

"My idea," Ragin said. "When Steggo reaches civilization, he'll tell the story his way. I want him to think you were detained aboard by force. It'll give your testimony more legality and protect you as well. I don't think you want to be investigated."

I thanked him. Quite a guy, this Ragin.

EX-CAPTAIN STEGGO, Chief Engineer Skandelli and five other officers lay on the floor of the little life-boat, restrain yokes about their necks. The fat man glared up madly.

"Cast me adrift in a small boat will you, Ragin? Well, I'll pull through somehow. I'll see you dissolving under the biggest thermons in the galactic navy!"

My guard bent over and spat in his face. "Aaah," he said, "Yer father's shmobber!"

"You'll pull through, all right," Ragin said soberly. "You have twelve collapsicons containing every conceivable need." He smiled. "And after you we get rid of that unholy viscodium."

He made rapid adjustments on the restraints, setting them to automatically turn off the binding lines of force within a half-hour. As he stooped over Skandelli, I noticed the chief was wearing a bandage over his chest.

"Do you want to make a little bet, fellow?" the engineer said softly. "I'll bet you my arms against your guts that before we're picked up you'll be warming a cot in a terran prison."

Ragin smiled down at him. "Now that's no way to talk, Skandelli. After you locked yourself in the Dendros and gave my men all that trouble in blasting you out! Some of them had such nice plans for you; they'd just adore keeping you on the *Reward* to play with."

Skandelli turned a creamy white and shut up.

"All set. Get ready to cast off. This guy," he indicated me, "stays with us. So does Ballew. They're hostages."

As the air-lock closed, I heard Steggo's wild shriek, "Dr. Sims, Dr. Sims, I swear you will be avenged!"

There was a *whoosh* as the life-boat arced away.

Ballew typed the papers on the basis of Ragin's written notes. We were alone on the bridge. Obviously, we were trusted.

I looked at Ballew's sullen, pale face. He was young for an officer, even aboard a cargo ship. What was in this for him? I asked him.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, rolling the last sheet out of the machine. "I ran away to sea first because I'd read a lot of books. The great ancients: Conrad, London, Nordhoff and Hall. Then I read books about space—*Mallard's Travels*, Soose, Jon Jim. So I thought I was in too limited a medium and went to astrogation school. But space is as dull as the sea."

I clucked sympathetically and ran my fingers over the smooth finish of the chair. "Things generally are, to a romantic. And you expected to find something really interesting in a mutiny?"

He flushed and I remembered how he had looked when the captain had been roaring at him. "Nothing like that. I knew Ragin on Aldebaran VI—Nascor, that is—and I'd gone on a couple of hunting trips to Aldebaran XVIII with some of the other members of the crew. When I signed on as astrogator I told them of the crew shortage and they came a-running. I even helped them stow their wives aboard." He stared at me defiantly.

Of course, I nodded to show I thought this was no crime under the circumstances. The kid went on.

"I'd never traveled with Steggo before, but I'd heard of him. When he started to pull this mercantile section stuff, I told Rildek and Gonda—Gonda was the guy watching over you all the time—and they passed the word. Tore in here in the middle of the court martial and took over the ship. Steggo was planning to toss those guys and their women through an air-lock!"

"Not a particularly nice thing to do, but the Fino Feminists did manage to wreck three squadrons at the beginning of the war. These men knew that women are strictly forbidden to be present on a ship without official escorts; why in the name

of the Curvature did they bring them?"

He shrugged. "Well, they wanted to build a home in a system where every foot of ground wasn't worth its weight in galactic credits. Aldebaran is almost all ore and almost all staked out. The Solarian asteroids have become pretty cheap during the war; they thought they'd pool their capital and buy one. But the women had to come or they'd be spending half their capital on fares. Aldebaran-Sol is an expensive trip."

"Don't I know!" I read the data he had typed and signed it. "Now I imagine they plan to hole out on Otho or one of the obscure little suns near it."

The papers were tucked in the astrographer's desk. "Don't know where exactly, except that it must be an uninhabited system and preferably unexplored. You'll be set on a course for Sol. If the ship is found in good condition and no murders are committed, the affair doesn't come under the jurisdiction of the galactic navy especially since it's being demobilized. And you know how much time the Aldebaranian Patrol will spend on a mutiny."

"About as much time as it takes to move the papers from the 'missing in space' to the 'wanted for mutiny' file. But you'll have trouble over women. Only seven of them."

"Maybe." He stretched and the blue pimple tightened over a meager chest. "The galaxy is big and business will be sun-bent for expansion after the war. We'll always be able to slip off and get a job somewhere when things cool off."

RAGIN came in heavily and thumbed through the charts. He selected one of them and studied it, swearing softly to himself.

Ballew looked at him inquiringly and continued. "Me, I have the satisfaction of helping my friends against a son of a bilge pump. I also get to know whether life on a desert planetoid is all it's cracked up to be."

"You'll get to know what a thermon tastes like," the tall man snarled suddenly. "Sol was this ship's original course, eh?"

The fair-haired kid had jumped to his feet. "Y-yes," he stuttered. "B-but I thought you could operate steering Dendros. I laid out a new course and all you had to do was st-steer to it."

"We can operate steering Dendros, all right," Ragin sneered. "When they're steerable." He hand flashed up, holding emptiness. My blusterbun.

"After you, doctor. I hope for your sake you are a physical chemist."

I walked ahead of him to the engine room. He gestured me inside. I was not feeling exactly immortal just then.

There was a little bubble of men around the double mass of convoluted machinery in the center. The bubble disintegrated as we came up and I stared at the green transparency for two minutes before I understood.

"Skandelli!" I shouted. "That's what he meant by that threat in the life-boat. And that's what I heard rushing by the outside bulkhead during the mutiny."

"Yeah. The rotten bushaleon holed up in here for an hour. One of the loading pipes runs under the floor-plates to the storage tank. He blasted a piece out of it and as soon the holding pressure went down far enough, the stuff came crawling out over the Dendros. Of course, it congealed faster than it could come out of the small opening so at least the ship wasn't flooded. Not that it makes much difference to us."

I squatted and touched the cold stuff experimentally. Hard as dendraloid itself. "I'm afraid you're out of luck, Ragin. You can't steer with clogged Dendros, and if I know viscodium, you'll never get them unclogged. This ship goes to Sol."

"Maybe the ship does," he said easily. "But you don't."

Their set faces frightened me. "I have your word of honor! And I thought you were one man who wouldn't break it."

"I'm sorry, doctor, but this is one time when my word will have to be plumb disintegrated. We gave most of our high-neutron fuel to that bunch in the life-boat and we couldn't hope to make an uninhabited system unless we brought the ship close to it first. If we get to Sol I might be able to cook up something like an atomic explosion to account for Steggo and his officers as well as the five crew members who were shmobered off."

"Ballew will back me up. As an officer, his testimony will be useful. If we all tell our stories straight, and if Steggo hasn't been picked up yet, we *might* be able to get away with it. But you're an outsider; we

could never take a chance on your suddenly remembering what your civics teacher said. No, you either unstick those Dendros or become our first planned corpse."

Sharp muzzles jabbed into my back. "But Ragin—I'm a physical, not a mucilaginous chemist. Do you know what viscodium is? There's a joke in the student labs: what viscodium hath joined together, no man can put asunder. It takes on the physical properties of whatever it congeals around and dendraloid is the hardest substance in the galaxy. If you try to split the block, you split the Dendros, too. The manufacturers are still working on a softener. They warn people not to use the stuff unless they intend it to be permanent."

"Well, Dr. Sims, you better start inventing," the leader said over his shoulder. He paused at the exit hatch. "You got exactly three weeks, figuring on terran time."

"No! Why don't you tell the unit of liquid measure is the Sirian drom? Something I don't know, I mean." I wasn't being sarcastic; I was scared.

Three weeks to solve a problem that had the best men in the field telling funny stories to their libidoes about their ids. No lab and no equipment. And me, a neutronium specialist!

"Run down to the medicine chest and see if there's any scaralx aboard," I told one of my guards. It had proven effective in treatment of people suffering from viscodium cancer, the result of a liquid drop touching the skin.

The man tore out of the engine room. I found a morose satisfaction in the discovery that I would get cooperation. "Like wearing an overcoat under thermon fire."

He came back with a container of scaralx which said in large letters: DANGER! THIS COMPOUND IS TO BE TAKEN ONLY AS THE PHYSICIAN PRESCRIBES! DO NOT USE INTERNALLY.

I opened the container feverishly. There were five aspirin tablets and an eye-dropper inside.

FOUR days later, Ragin looked in on me on his daily tour of inspection. I had gotten around to using banked thermons. My eyes were red with fatigue. They let me go to my cabin whenever I wanted, but I hadn't been able to sleep. I was going to

solve this problem and get to earth in one piece, or I was going to burst my frontal lobe.

"How's it going, doc?" the big man asked.

"Not so good," I gritted. "I don't dare use too much juice for fear of melting the machinery. I've been trying to run it on an alternating current generator so that the heat is applied only to the surface in short bursts. But this stuff conducts too damn fast. I'll solve it somehow, though."

"Attaboy," he encouraged. "That's the old scientific spirit."

He wilted under my glare. "Sorry. I've no call to be funny. I wish those slobs—Steggo and Skandelli—were here. They'd have their mouths washed with viscodium, they would. Although," he considered, "they probably despise us just as much as we do them. You're the only innocent bystander."

The women, dressed in gay Aldebaranian frocks, were peering anxiously through the hatch. I thought of how much workable Dendros meant to them. After all, their claim was as just as mine.

"Forget it."

"You see," he explained anxiously, "this is a democracy we have here, a democracy of the purest kind because it's close as yet to the conditions which produced it. I'm only the leader; and even if I wanted to set you free because I trust you, the rest of the men can't feel that sure."

"I understand. You have a sound mind, Ragin. A pity only solarians and sagittarians are allowed in galactic government."

"Yeah. That's what I kept telling them."

Everybody laughed and tension dissolved. Gonda leaned over his shmobber and said to a neighbor: "See what did I tell you—the doc is a good guy!"

The tall mutineer came over and stood at my side. Together we stared at the stubborn viscodium, green and immovable.

We all perspired quietly in useless, repetitious thought.

"It beats the living shavings out of me," Ragin said finally, "how that goo won't let us make any adjustments in the Dendros that will turn us away from the Solarian Patrol, but keeps them working the way they were set."

"Property of the substance," I yawned wearily. "In order to steer you must use

the Dendros as moving parts; viscodium between the parts precludes that. However Dendros merely vibrate through the space warp on straight drive; the viscodium having assumed the characteristics of the substance to which it adheres, vibrates along with it, actually adding to its efficiency. If the Dendros stop, so does the viscodium. Any activity of the bound object automatically becomes an activity of that filthy slime."

"Suppose you change the make-up of the Dendros, then. You could negate them and take the whole business apart with hyper-tongs. After we got rid of the viscodium, the boys would reassemble the machines and make 'em solid. No?"

I shook my head. "No. Space negation is dangerous enough with the proper equipment and under the proper conditions. Here, you'd just save the Solarian Patrol a lot of grief by tearing a hole right through the ether. Besides, you can't negate dendraloid. Of course, if you could change the physical properties of dendraloid enough to pick the viscodium off, you'd be set. But any way I figure it, you wind up without any motors at all."

"And with the ship carrying no transmitter, that would not be nice. No matter what these damned bushaleons are doing to us, we have to keep them in good condition. I have the boys oiling them internally every six hours. That's the minimum period according to the manual."

When I could get my tongue disentangled from my teeth, I grabbed his arm. "Oil them? What kind of oil?"

He looked down, puzzled. "Machine oil. Not the terran kind—"

"You poor, broken blasthead!" I yelled. "Is there any molecular joint lubricant on this filthy, meteor-broken scow?"

A light of purest joy broke over his face. He snapped out an order.

One of the men scurried to a cabinet and peered inside. At his triumphant shout everybody exhaled gustily.

"Use the mittens," I called to him. "There should be a pair of insulated mittens next to the case."

The Aldebaranian came staggering back with a container whose walls were made of thinnest neutronium. Inside it splashed the most beautiful purple liquid I'd ever seen. Molecular oil!

It meant a reprieve from the negative space foundries for the men. It meant a reprieve from imprisonment with Fino Feminists for the women. As for me—it meant reprieve . . .

"Dig up a couple of loading pipes," I ordered. "Clean ones. They're the only things that have linings to take the stuff. You can make one of them into a funnel and cup it under the whole block of Dendros and solid viscodium. Then run a pipe from the funnel to an air-lock and if it works we can pump the goo right out into space."

"If it works!" Ragin caroled. "It's got to work! We're down to our last electron in this pot. It's got to work!"

It worked.

We poured the purple liquid into a vat of sirian machine oil. Then we squirted the mixture, at the highest pressure we could generate, along the Dendro input pipes under the floor plates. It took a while for the super lubricant to work its way through the heavy colloid. Then the outside of the machinery shone with a sudden purple sheen as oil oozed through the molecules of dendraloid.

Ragin yelled and pounded my back into my chest.

Slowly the viscodium changed from green to purple. It became softer and softer, as the physical characteristics of the object it gripped changed from solid to liquid. Finally, it flowed evenly into the funnel. We heard it gurgling through the loading pipe on the way to the air-lock, moving slower and becoming more viscous as it went.

One of the mutineers volunteered to crawl under the Dendros. While we watched breathlessly, he held the neutronium container under the tapering, bottom point of the drive motors. He caught every drop of the molecular joint lubricant in the container. Naturally—he had to.

BALLEW turned from his charts and said, "I hope you won't get angry, but the men are—well, insistent that you stay in your cabin while the life-boats are leaving. It isn't that they don't trust you, but—"

"They feel my conscience will help my mouth in depriving the Solarian Patrol of information if I don't know where they're heading. I understand."

He smiled at me out of poor teeth. "That's it. While you were prying the viscodium loose, I was a prisoner in the brig. And I've known these men for years. They felt, that as an officer, I didn't have the same size stake as say Ragin has, with his wife involved the way she is. They were right. That's why I'm staying aboard with you. I'm going on to Sol."

"Are you that confident I won't inform on you?"

A rustle of charts as he turned one around. There was a youthful grin on his face. "Yes. You see we had your cabin searched before the mutiny. Nothing important was found. Except for half a container of *unused depilo-sac* dissolving in the waste chamber."

I stopped breathing and sat up straight. What a stupid slip!

"Ragin claimed it 'meant nothing. I didn't think so. I thought about it and thought about it until I came' to the one possible solution. Now I know you have just as much interest in my not talking about this trip as I have in your keeping quiet. So I'm going on to Sol and after the patrol finishes its routine check—it won't be more than that with Ragin taking all responsibility in the log—I'll go my way and you'll go yours, *Doctor Sims*."

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Only Ragin, just after you finished with that mess in the engine room. He didn't believe it at first."

I bounded out of the room. Ragin was in his cabin with his wife. They were packing.

When I entered, he was almost halfway through the ninety-five volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Galactica*. As each volume passed into the force field of the collapsicon, it diminished to one-twentieth of its original size. I stared at the miniature books lying at the bottom of the mechanical valise.

The Aldebaranian woman left quietly in response to her husband's signal. I cleared my throat. "Don't open that thing suddenly when you start unpacking, or you'll think an avalanche hit you."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I know. I've used collapsicons before." There was a silence.

"Er-how do you expect to live on a bare planetoid? You can't grow food where there isn't oxygen."

"Oh, we sunk our money in extractors. We'll be able to suck enough raw elements out of whatever we hit to get started. After that it's a matter of our own ingenuity."

"And the books are for your children?"

"Yeah, Elsa wants a lot of them. And I'm going to see they grow up with all the knowledge the galaxy has available."

Ragin coughed. "By the Hole in Cygnus, doctor, why couldn't you wait? A naval employee, too! Six months and the liners would be running again, and everything would be open and above-board."

"I have a son in a naval hospital on earth," I told him. "We haven't seen each other in three years and I still couldn't get a priority. He may be dead in six months."

"Yes, that would be it. But your papers—"

"My papers refer to Dr. R. Sims, physical chemist, of naval research, Aldebaranian Project CBX-19329. Horkey, my superior, made them out for me just that way, gave me an indefinite leave of absence and wished me luck."

He squeezed my hand in a last, friendly mangle and accompanied me to the door. "Don't worry about Ballew. He's a good kid. The only reason he mentioned his discovery at all, was because he decided to go to Sol and he wanted you to know how secure he felt. He's read too many books, maybe."

BEFORE they left, the mutineers showed Ballew and me how to set the Dendros. In the end, he worked out the charts and I tended the machinery. Just as well. I felt safer that way.

"You know," Ballew said lazily as he waited for the solarian warpers to pull us into the system. "All I can think of is a little old bar in New York. A little old bar where I'm going to get stinking drunk."

He was cute. Personally, I was dreaming of Max's Salon in Chicago. Max's where I, Roberta Sims, Sc. D., Ph. D., Ga. D., would be getting a glorious terrestrial permanent wave.

After my hair had grown back, of course.



The shocked Martie stumbled back.

Design For Doomsday

By Bryce Walton

Slogging through Venus' reeking muck and groping horrors toward the forbidding dome of Solar Science City—treasure-vault of the best brains in the Sytem—Guardsmen Venard remembered the frightened whispers: "An evil god rules there!"

THE TONE OF THE SLURRED, emotionless voice was cold and deadly, as were the tones of all Martians who had taken to their grotesque hearts the mystic, dictatorial disease of

Zharkonism. It droned an implacable death song from the audio. It echoed horribly down the shadow-eaten labyrinth of that sprawling death-mart which was officially labeled Terro Concentration Camp Seven.

... Another exalted warrior of the Occupational Armies of Zharkon, the Undying—Zharkon, the ever-just and divine director of the Solar System—Zharkon, the voice of the Gods—has been brutally slain by terran underground subversives. In retaliation, five hundred Terran inferiors will go to the experimental wards by decree of our divine Martian Zharkon—Zharkon, our illustrious solar father ...

The audio droned on. But none of the tier on tier of doomed men imprisoned in the rehabilitated ruins of Washington's subterranean levels listened any more. They were ragged, skeletal shapes crouched like frightened animals in the filthy shadows. Feverishly bright eyes stared with a fanatic's hunger for death, the release from hopeless, mind-shattering pain and indignity. Those who would not willfully sign away their futures to colonial slavery under the Martian dictatorship were killed in devious and ghastly ways. The death toll was high.

In each of the little prison cubicles two figures waited, helpless behind cold metal. It would seem impossible to find even one face which did not wear the terrible scar of resignation which marks the souls of the hopeless. Yet in one of these prison cubicles there were two such. Two Terran Guardsmen.

The great Terran Guards, what few remained of the once colorful and renowned Solar Patrol, semantically trained, objective yet warmly human, knew there was no resignation. That was death if carried to its obvious conclusion. While one lived, one moved, acted, and was acted upon. While one lived there was conflict, and there was always hope.

Although perhaps only the few remnants of the Guards and the small Underground which flourished dangerously somewhere in the ruins of the Earth retained this pre-Solar War attitude. Perhaps this stubborn minority totaled one percent. Perhaps. No one knew.

The tall, gaunt figure gripped the prison bars in two big hands. Karl Venard, Ex-Lieutenant, strained hawk-like features outward, his thin lips twisted. He turned suddenly to snarl, "This is it, Louie. We're the only two Guardsmen left in this sad

hole. We'll be among this draft. Start praying."

Louie Larson, the little man who still, somehow, managed to be overweight in spite of being half-starved, shivered.

"The least you can do is die like a man," snarled Venard. "You're a disgrace to the Guards."

The fat little man grabbed Venard's ragged sleeves.

"Remember what the grapevine said last night, Karl? It said that the Underground on Mars had managed to blow up the Zharkon's throne room and him in it. It said the Zharkon had been injured, maybe killed, that his double-brain was on the blink. Maybe that's right, Karl. Maybe it might really have happened! Gad, Karl. If they've done that, I don't care about dying. Knowin' that, death would be a pleasure, almost. Tell me you think it's so, Karl. I'll not be scared any more, if you'll say you believe it's true."

"How the devil should I know," murmured Venard. "I doubt it. Maybe there is an Underground operating on Mars as efficiently as the one here on Earth, but I doubt it. The Marties fell for that Zharkonism mania like a degravitated dwarf star. And even if they do have a working Underground organization there how could they ever get into the Zharkon's throne room? That's carrying wishful thinking a little too far, Kewpie Doll. Forget it."

"Listen," sputtered the little man desperately, "how about them Martians who went to the Academy with us? They'd never fall for Zharkonism. They was semantically trained, too. They're too smart for all this myth and legend stuff. I'll bet every solar credit I might have had that Jhongan could have gotten into that throne room."

Venard's harsh features softened for an instant. Jhongan, the Martian, had studied in the Academy during the golden days of the Solar Democratic Federation. Yes, Martians like Jhongan would never have become Zharkonites. But there were too few of them. His hardened mouth curled cynically.

"Start praying, Kewpie Doll. If semantics can turn out an anachronism like you it can even manufacture incipient Zhar-

konites. Why, you can't even speak good old Terro-English."

Louis Larson looked as though he were going to cry. "We gotta do something, Karl. It only takes a few minutes after one of them announcements for them heathen Marties to start playin' human grab bag. We gotta do something!"

"What do you want to do, Kewpie Doll, live forever?" grinned Venard. "Besides, there is a way out for us. We don't have to go to the experimental wards. Have you forgotten this little memento from my long lost love?"

WITH infinite caution, Venard disclosed the memory-crystal, taking it with a kind of dignified stealth from beneath the rags that had once been a shirt. Dreamily he studied the small, delicate translucence of the sphere. He had managed to retain that from the pawing Marties' greedy scanners. Looking back into Venard's eyes from the shifting beauty of the sphere, the three-dimensional, almost frighteningly life-like figure of Vale who had once loved Venard, preened and sighed provocatively. The figure moved, danced in lithe grace through shifting clouds. A strange, heart-aching vision of reality and dream.

Louie Larson's beady black eyes bulged, sweat popped out of his pallid skin and trickled down through the bristles of his dirt-caked beard. "You—you're gonna use that?"

"Suicide, that's better than the experimental ward, isn't it? Kewpie Doll, sometimes you leave the experimental wards alive, but no one would ever guess you had once been human. They work on the genes, son. And they're devilishly clever." He gripped the memory-crystal. "This is a quick and easy way. There's enough of that amazing explosive developed by the Venusian Sea People in this crystal to blow everything for fifty yards around us to hell. Oh, I'll use it, Kewpie Doll."

"Sure, I'd prefer it to the wards," moaned Larson softly, "but this—this suicide, it's so final."

"There's something pretty nice about finality, Kewpie Doll. If you can really find it."

They waited. Larson picked at his beard, lips twitching. Venard looked

dreamily into the cloudy depths of the memory-crystal. Next to them in a stinking cell, a man began to cry, a series of burbling choking cries of fear and hopeless hate. From somewhere far down the corridor, a woman was singing an ancient hymn.

Venard was extremely fortunate to have retained the memory-crystal. A few prisoners had been able to do likewise. Because of the unique physiogenic quality of the little spheres, ordinary scanners failed to detect their presence. They were small and could be concealed under one's clothing, and passed from one prisoner to another to escape discovery. Others had used their suicidal capacity for a final escape from unspeakable pain and horror.

Because of the difficulty in finding them, the memory-spheres constituted a constant threat to the Martian guards. Many a Martie had developed violent neurosis from knowing that the prisoners they guarded might be hiding a memory-crystal, and might also at any moment, merely by pressing a small release within the spheres, set off the mutually antagonistic elements and blow up guards, prisoners and things surrounding them to bloody ruin.

The incredibly beautiful and life-like face floating inside the crystal laughed mockingly up at Venard through opaque, silvery mists. No horror there. The little, diaphanous, three-dimensional figure dancing through the shifting vapors of the memory sphere floated in a never-ending dream of things as they might have been. Vale, lovely and enchanting Vale, the way she had looked and danced when she had loved him in those carefree happy days before the Solar War. Nostalgia, bitterly sweet, of lost and unrecoverable nights, dream-lost beauty of Luna nights the blood-drenched holocaust. Vale, before she had went away to Venus and to that hungry maw that ate up the best minds of the Solar System, Solar Science City.

Venard swore softly to himself. How silly he was to feed on memory, like a parasite gnawing on itself and growing hungrier with each futile bite.

The little man's eyes stared through the bars into the dreary shadows of the cell block. "Gods, Karl!" he moaned suddenly. "Karl! I hear 'em comin' down the line! Dirty heathens."

Ex-lieutenant K. Venard looked down curiously at the bald head. No one would guess the existence there of steel nerves, iron will, somehow strangely integrated with a golden heart.

"I hear 'em," Larson whispered hoarsely. "Swissshhh — swissshhh — swissshhh. I hear their slimy feet squeegy'n' along. I hear their body juices sloshin' around inside their cold bellies like walkin' quarts of *stihn*. Karl—if I only had a quart of *stihn*!" Abruptly he sank down in a sad, dejected heap.

"Yeah," growled the ex-lieutenant. "Keep crying, Kewpie Doll. If something happens to our memory-crystal here, we'll be drinking vat-acid tonight."

"Oh, don't talk that way, Karl!" moaned Larson. "Things is bad enough. Things is simply terrible. Either we blow ourselves to tendons or get pried and peered into by these furriners. We're gonna have those probosci dinnin' into our innards. We're gonna—"

"Shut up!" yelled Venard. Maybe the little man really was cracking up. No man is infallible. Maybe he, Karl Venard, would crack up too. He and Larson had been through a lot. But never anything like this. This was definite, inescapable. Maybe a little rationalizing, and wishful thinking, would be a good idea. Maybe he could even talk himself into believing that grapevine story about the Zharkon.

"What do we care, Kewpie Doll," he said, grabbed Larson and lifted him onto his feet. "I been thinkin' it over, and I think maybe that story about the Zharkon getting his double-brain injured might have some basis in fact. The way I figure it, that story is too fantastic to be handed out with any expectation of having it believed if it weren't true. Or at least we can assume it has some basis in reality."

Larson's round, staring face altered with sudden violence. His hands clutched Venard's sleeves. His eyes brightened. "Say it again. Keep on sayin' it."

Venard said it again. It was working. He really was beginning to believe it himself. "Sure it's very, very possible that the old semantically-trained Martians like Jhongan got into that throne room some-way and conked out the Zharkon's double-brain, and that's a lot of conking. And do

you know what that means? It means the whole Zharkonistic set-up will be thrown off center, maybe disintegrate entirely. Remember, the Marties have regressed in a social sense. They're primitives now. They worship the old gods — Styx, Amphoor, Aalghor. Their leader, the Zharkon, is the mouthpiece of the gods. If he goes, the gods and the whole militaristic mythology could very possibly crumble overnight."

It sounded magnificent. And it was possible, if one was sufficiently desperate.

"But it ain't true, an' you know it, Karl," moaned Larson.

"Oh, the devil with you," yelled Venard. "You're a negativistic melancholic, among other unmentionable things. As an example of the semantically trained mind, you speak oddly for the world of null-A."

"The awful disgrace of it, Karl. The whole Solar System taken over by barbaric sponges with legs. Who'd ever thought they had it in 'em?"

Venard gripped the cell bars in his big hands and pressed his forehead tightly against the cool hardness. "Yeah," he muttered. "Damnation, Kewpie Doll! I wish we could've escaped to the Underground. If the Martian Underground have really managed to injure Zharkon, that means maybe the Martian Terro-Colonial Armies of Occupation might disorganize, fall apart. And if we could only contact the Underground here—"

Venard shook his head; sweat speckled the metal wall. Fools. There was nothing to the rumor, because such a thing was impossible. There was no escape. Only the memory-crystal, a quick, self-administered destruction. Blackout.

Larson's voice was a faint, far-away whisper. "They're comin' for us. Look at them furriners—"

METAL doors had been clanging open. Venard was suddenly aware of the shuffling of feet and the lifeless stirring and phlegmatic voices of those whose minds had surrendered. Venard leaned against the wall of the cubicle. He wouldn't stand at attention now. Not again. He had once to avoid being beaten. But they couldn't do anything more to a man than kill him. And he would take care of that now, his own way. A much quicker and less complicated

way than was to be found in the experimental wards.

The women were the first of the pathetic line of chained humans who staggered into sight around a turn in the dark corridor. Their cells were on the west half of Concentration Camp No. 7 and they were always first in the hostage lines. Bony human wrecks in drab and ragged sack-like garments. Grey faces behind dry strings of unhealthy, scaly hair.

"The Marties, they ain't got any intelligence at all," whispered Larson, "to make beautiful females look that way. They're fiends. I remember when maybe them very ladies used to dance to a Ganymedian orchestra in the Lunaville escapeway. That first one, now, she might be Glora Karstedt. Glora was the most beautiful woman in the System. Hey, Glora! Remember me, Kewpie Doll Larson?"

The pathetic skin-and-bone shape didn't even smile. Dull eyes stared straight ahead, pallid, blood-streaked face that was a blank mask of frozen horror. Venard gripped the bars. His knuckles shone whitely, his whole body a tense, helpless arc of mental torture. "If they could only die as Earthmen," he said softly. "And not as slaves."

Two Marties passed, one pressed a button.

"It's us all right," said Venard tensely. The cell door ground open. Boneless lengths of purple-veined arms, muscled like serpents, reached in and dragged the little man out first. Others reached for Venard. Animate sacks of liquid intelligence. Four sliding and contracting feet like snails. Filamented arms of great strength guided by highly emotional intelligence. Judged by human standards, these were horrors. Yet intelligence can hide behind any kind of facade. A mind adjusted to Solar concepts is influenced by intelligence and behavior alone, not by exterior physical aspects. These Martians had been good Solar citizens once, responsible and progressive. But they had been seduced by delusions of grandeur. The old Martian Royalists who had been overthrown a hundred years ago had returned. And returning, they had conquered democratic progressive thought, returned Mars to the old gods of carnage and dark evil, had plunged the Solar System into an orgy of primitive blood-lust, barbarism and hate.

Venard swore, threw off a heavy, plopping arm. Somehow, the heavy bulging body sacks had always resembled punching bags. He had longed to test this visual impression with tactile experimentation. A squeeshing smack belched out from beneath his fist. The shocked Martie stumbled back against the line of apathetic prisoners. Articulation on the tips of its appendages writhed after the butt of its sheathed H-gun.

But it didn't kill. Sadists in the experimental wards wanted every organism for their grisly research.

"Oh, Karl, you shouldn't ought to have done that," groaned Larson as he lifted the chain another Martie was trying to lower around his thick neck. Larson wrapped it around the Martian's purple-veined head instead, and with considerable force. Then a heavy arm slashed like a huge whip, thudded across Larson's flat nose. Blood spattered as the little man slumped, groaning, to his knees.

Venard was struggling in blind, hating helplessness with a number of arms that had encircled him like cable coils. And after that, as the line shuffled along, the chains were cold as space around his neck. And the thudding of the leathery arms flailing his back burned deeper than any Martie knew.

But against his side, in a little plastic pouch, the memory-crystal nestled. It was a comfortable feeling, the memory-crystal gave him. A comfortable chilling sensation, both warm and cold. Like an acrostic sonnet to death.

II

THEY WERE CHAINED TO A wall like dumb, dangerous beasts, though such a precaution appeared pitifully unnecessary. At frequent intervals, a contingent of Martin sycophants entered the narrow but high corridor and took a varied number of human slaves through a huge oval door. A door that had once been a gateway of learning into worlds devoted to peace and progressive research. This great structure, now in ruins from the Solar War between Mars and the rest of the System (except the world of the enigmatic Jovians who had remained neutral) had once been known as World Tech.

Now it was a huge torture chamber made more hideous because of its modern scientific equipment used for such savage, barbaric research.

There was a terrible kind of silence between these episodes of the opening of the door, except for the half-crazed breathing of resigned humans. But when the oval door opened, screams came out. There were dim, quick impressions of steam and odors. And of shadows that seemed only partly human now, writhing on a wall.

Blobs of sweat rolled down the little man's red face. A thick two-week's beard itched. Venard brooded over the three-dim memory-sphere of Vale, when no Guards were close enough to detect his furtive actions.

"About two more trips and we're going to be taken in there," choked Larson. "Karl! Look at me an' listen now." His voice lowered, trembled. "It's against my religious principles to take my own life. I'd rather get mine fighting fair. If we fight, maybe we can make 'em blast us with them H-guns."

"We've tried often enough," said Venard. "They're too handy with those whips they call arms."

Venard looked sardonically into the three-dim photo-crystal at the beautiful blond figure floating in it, shifting among multi-colored clouds. Red lips smiled, and deep, impassioned eyes shone up at Venard from the incredibly realistic opening that might almost have been a doorway into another world.

"Karl," moaned Larson, wringing his hands like a frightened girl. "Don't waste the last mortal seconds of your life moonin' over that faithless female."

The oval door opened. A long cry fluttered out. It bounded down the hall and through dark shadows and hollows. It was like a long nerve of cloth torn in two. It was a tattered, terrible sound. Larson shook, his jowls quivered, his eyes bulged. "Gods, Karl! What do they do to people in there? It's like hell, ain't it? Just like Dante's hell!"

"Beautiful," answered Venard softly. "Lovely as freedom. Soft as a night in Theophilus Crater."

"Huh? Oh, you mean her? She did you dirt. Why can't you forget her? She walked out on you. She wanted to be a sci-

entist, not Mrs. K. Venard. Forget her! Listen, I'm gonna make 'em blast me with their H's. You with me, Karl? Hey, she ain't worth a man's last thoughts."

The woman's face shifted, seemed to wink at Venard. His big, dirty hand carressed the cloudy dream stuff of the image. His ragged fingernail looked grotesque beside the cloudy loveliness.

"Irony, isn't it, Kewpie Doll? She still lives, free and immune, I guess. Only traitors live and know freedom. But she loved me anyway, Kewpie Doll, even if she was only a passing fantasy. She was okay, just too intelligent for love. An I. Q. of 200. That's a lot of quotient. I said to her that night under the rim of Theophilus, 'Vale—this is it. Take your choice. Either me or your internship in Solar Science City. You either go into that science convent on Venus to wither away the rest of your unnatural life, or you and I take a honeymoon right here.' And, Kewpie Doll, you know what she said to me then?"

"How could I know?" slobbered Larson, eyes bugging at the oval door. It was opening again. "I heard it only eleven hundred and fifty-eight and one half times. Karl! I think they'll get us this trip. They—"

VENARD continued softly, as if unaware of the approaching Martie guards. "She said, Karl, darling. I love science and what it means to the System. All Venus is a wilderness, except for the odd under-sea civilization of the Sea People, and the great domed University called Solar Science City. Something's terribly wrong there—I don't know what, but there's something. Solar Science City was established by the best mentalities and resources of the entire System, for the good of the System. But for almost a hundred years Solar Science City has been an isolated, mysterious, incommunicative shell hiding something dark and evil. Because of my I.Q. I've been given the privilege of going there, if I desire. And I've decided to go. I'm going to find out why S. C. has retreated into its own shell, and no longer serves mankind. I'm going to find out what happens to all the great mentalities that go there. When I find out, I'll be back, Karl. Back to you."

"A nice speech that, Kewpie Doll. But

she never came back. No one ever comes back if they go into S.S.C. as either a faculty or student-member. If the war hadn't come along I was going to S.S.C. and find out the score. I wonder what the mystery is, and what happened to Vale. Two years, and not a word from her. She probably never even knew the Martians attacked the System. Or, if she did, I'll bet she never cared."

"Why worry now!" howled Larson, mopping at his head. "What can it matter now?"

"It does matter, in a way," said Venard. "Because S.S.C. could have saved the System. On our side, S.C.C. could have enabled us to defeat the Martians. The fact that they never even considered helping us proves that they are, themselves, somehow allied to decadence and evil. And they're safe. Even the Marties don't have weapons strong enough to break into S.S.C. And S.S.C. has weapons of science perfected in its super laboratories that could have defeated the Martian warlords in a few days. Wonder what is the secret of S.C.C.? The barbaric Martian desert tribes say that it is now ruled by an alien god. Anyway, dear Vale knows. But she won't tell."

"Alien god! Prepare," admonished Larson, "to meet your own."

"I'm ready." Venard clutched the memory-crystal tightly in his hand.

DIM fluorescents high in the plastic ceiling of the lofty corridor shed faint cold night. The purplish hue of the Martian's body sacks reflected the light like radioactive matter. Stocked eyes wavered, yellowish pale, iridescent horrors.

Venard turned. His chain rattled gently, without malice. He looked with studied insolence at the writhing-eyed Martian Guard who was coming toward him. Now it was removing the chain from the galling iron band about his waist. Another was doing the same with Larson. Guards stood at a slight distance with H-guns waiting to be drawn. Beneath his sour-smelling clothes, Venard grasped the memory crystal.

The tale behind the crystals flashed quickly through his mind; because it was rather a sorrowfully lovely tale, and the moment could use a touch of alien beauty.

In the pre-Solar Federation era, colorful sea-women of Venus, members of that semi-human and empirically intelligent race, were said to have carried the crystals while love remained true, but always ready to utilize the destructive power of the crystal for suicide when the lover whose face was captured in the cumulus depths of the sphere proved faithless.

Long before the Solar War the Venusians, with the ancient custom only legend, had made the memory-crystals and sold them to a few hardy tourists for stupendous amounts of Solar credits. It had even been said that much of the vital life stuff of the one portrayed was imprisoned in the crystalline gadget. But horrified by the slaughter and barbarisms of the approaching war, the opaque Venusians had retreated to their under-sea cities and had remained hidden, far removed from war's madness. Venard didn't blame them in a way, any more than he blamed the Jovians who had remained neutral. The Venusian Seapeople were a timid, shy, highly aesthetic species, with a strange kind of non-physical, non-mechanical science—more of a philosophical, empirical mental science such as was embodied in the evolving of the memory-crystals.

The explosive power of the spheres wasn't anything tremendous; but this one could certainly wreck this particular part of Concentration Camp 7.

Venard watched the chains sliding through the Marto-alloy bands. He saw the ragged, hunched shapes of broken men and women sagging in horror and weakness as they were herded toward the oval door. And the door was opening again, maybe for the last time. A red, roaring flame was visible in there; a long quavering cry ripped through.

Venard stood back against the cold wall, raised the memory-crystal. He thought fleetingly that the figure in the sphere was so life-like that to destroy it was like murder. But Venard didn't care about murdering now. Not even murdering Vale's memory. Even memories were born to die.

"Earthmen!" he yelled suddenly, his voice cracking sharply against dulled minds like a whip-lash. Glazed eyes shifted. Bowed backs moved apathetically. A few bony hands pawed the air. "We'll die like

men!" yelled Venard. He flourished the memory crystal.

The Marties fell away. Their eye stalks writhed in abysmal fear. The dejected mass of filthy human wrecks lifted sunken faces, stared. It seemed that their minds were too dulled by shock and fear to even comprehend the meaning of a quick, clean death.

"Earthmen!" Venard's voice lashed out again. How long would it take the fanatical Marties to plunge at him in suicidal fervor? Not long. "Let's sing," he said it suddenly, on a mad impulse. These creatures must die as men. "The Terran Anthem hasn't been sung for a long time. Sing!"

There was magnetic driving power in his words. The Marties were trembling with indecision. Appendages were creeping toward H-guns. Venard made a threatening gesture with the memory-crystal. And the appendages stopped creeping—for a little while.

"The Terran Anthem!" yelled Venard again. There was a reckless, sardonic smile on his face that Larson had never expected to see again. "We'll sing ourselves to sleep. These Martie scum think our courage is gone, our spirits broken. SING!"

It was a magnificent miracle. Dull eyes slowly rose up through many levels of fear and defeat and shock. Bent bodies straightened beneath dirt-caked rags. Bearded faces of men and haggard faces of women glowed with surging inner fires, newly kindled. Hands and arms raised. Voices joined in the Terran Anthem. The song the Martians hated with all the power of their cold minds to hate. Bony arms raised, quivering with weakness, but not anymore with fear. And cracked voices that grew stronger with each surging note, joined in a last outburst of defiance.

Earth, Earth is mine.

No Gods destroy its soft green wine

Of verdant hills and sun-warmed summertime.

Earthmen we! Soldiers of the azure sea!

Pioneers had sung it when colonization of bitter worlds was only beginning. In the unending swamps of Venus, its turbulent strains had shattered the dreary mo-

notony of loneliness. Over the deserts of Mars and the iceflows of Saturn the song had spelled unity of purpose, defiance of seemingly insurmountable barriers. Many an Earthman had died in the alien vapors of far places with its blood-stirring rhythm on his lips.

Unashamed tears cut the grime of Larson's face as he stood there on wide spread, stubby legs. But Venard laughed with animal joy and flourished the memory sphere. A beautiful woman still laughed from its crystalline depths, smiled without care as though she were again meeting Venard in the synthetic spring gardens of Theophilus Crater.

THE Martians shivered with indecision. They were fanatical, though; only a few more seconds would be needed to send them in an exulting suicidal charge. But louder the slaves sang.

Earth! Earth we know.

*Immortal world where Solar dreamers go
To sleep among ice-peaks and sunlit snow.*

Earthman! Wanderer of space and sky.

The chorus was a swelling, deafening thunder of defiance in the towering expanse of corridor. Alarms clanged confusion in the background. Doors opened on the many tiers above Venard and Larson. Glaring lights swept frantically in sporadic circles. Marties appeared in hundreds of openings with H-guns poised, nervously, uncertainly; anxiety mucous flowed from pulsing pores.

"Sing!" laughed Venard wildly. He didn't feel quite sane, and he didn't care. "Earth isn't dead. Not while you can still sing, you're not dead, and your song will live forever!"

His wild laughter rang carelessly and madly up the towering heights of the partly-repaired corridor, down the lengths of it both ways, through the open oval door beyond which torture flames still glittered and shadowed, dehumanized bodies curled.

A thunderous moan spread up and outward. Chains clanged as awakened hope and honor and returning sense of dignity burned again in withered hearts. Then a number of H-guns burst suddenly into spontaneous, nervous slaughter.

"Sing!" Venard heard his voice echo

ing for the last time. He drew back the arm which held the memory-crystal. A beam of crackling power burned his side. Seared flesh was nausea in his face. He dodged, dancing in his gauntness and flapping rags like a grotesque clown.

On Earth, of Earth we die!

Her sweet, enchanted winds our requiem cry.

For our lost love her gentle south winds sigh.

Earthmen we—

Suddenly, Larson leaped at the nearest Martian. He whipped to one side as an H-gun hurtled to the plastic mesh of the floor. He dived for it. But power rays crackled around him, glanced off walls and smoked through trembling layers of human flesh.

Larson sank slowly to his knees. His lips, thick with awed pain, mumbled heavily, "Give me time to pray." He was looking in startled surprise and horror at the blackened stub where his left hand had been. It happened so fast. A second ago he had a left hand. Now he had no left hand. But that would be so unimportant in a little while. The H-gun lay untouched. Screams rose from writhing forms.

"Throw the damned bomb," yelled Larson weakly. "And let me finish a prayer."

Venard twisted, a slim and gyrating target for thirsting rays. The entire corridor was a carnal room. A streak of flame seared his chest. He cried out, "No time for prayers now. Go on down to hell, Kewpie Doll. At least it's better than the one the Marties had planned for us."

Then he murmured, "Goodby, Vale, you served a good purpose after all." He hurled the coruscating sphere squarely against the wall beside the oval door. With the same movement his body fell sidewise in a dive to the floor where he was squeezing himself instinctively up against the wall as the concussion shook his brain into smothering dusty grayness.

III

HE DECIDED THAT HE WAS DYING and that as he died he dreamed. He felt no pain. Only triumphant gladness. They had died like men. What did it matter that the story of the Zharkon's

double-brain injury was only a glorious dream? What was the difference if the Martians continued to rule the system for a million years?

It made no difference. The song these ragged, filthy slaves had sung in a Concentration camp would be a symphonic background for the final chaotic death-pangs of the Martian culture. The songs of Earth, somehow, had always possessed a kind of deathless quality.

But what an odd dream for a dying mind! He was floating down a dark, dripping hall. Strange lights glowed. Something moved under him, something very solid and real for a dream or for death.

A far away voice said very softly against his ear, "Sleep, my friend. Rest. Sleep deeply and build up your strength. Get ready for a desperate journey."

And then, dropping into a velvet abyss, he really did sleep. Sometime later, Karl Venard awoke. And really knew he still suffered among the living when he heard a familiarly whining voice shouting: "I been cheated! I prayed—but them stalagmites look awful suspicious to me. You ain't foolin' me, La Crue! I'm in hell!" Larson was evidently very much alive.

Another familiar, but almost forgotten voice answered, "You're raising plenty of it, that's certain."

Venard could hardly believe it. La Crue, alive! The name snapped Venard's consciousness on full like a sudden bright flame. He sat up on a narrow bed. He was in a dry, comfortable spot surrounded by the mores of civilization, though in a chaotic rapidly constructed state. But some distance along a rough, natural underground cavern of vaulted proportions, calcareous water dripped monotonously. From the phosphorescent rock strata he realized he was deeply underground. A deeply buried natural cavern with damp recesses that justified Larson's violent waking reaction.

And La Crue, alive. La Crue had been the physician aboard the war ship *Valeron*, an old friend from pre-war Academy days. How many others of the Terran Guards were alive who, logically, should be dead? Venard raised up onto his elbows, watched La Crue leave Larson's side and come toward him. He looked ghost-like. Pallid from months spent

underground. But his lean body was healthy and vital enough otherwise. His square jaw was smoothly shaven. He grinned broadly at Venard.

"How you feeling, Karl?" He sat down on a flat rock. Below them, Venard could hear an underground river churning. He answered, "La Crue — you're — all three of us are supposed to be dead."

La Crue smiled wryly. "Not every Guardsman who fought that last battle over the Polar Palaces of Mars was killed. I'd say about a thousand escaped to the Martian Underground. Some of them, including myself, were transferred here by Underground space ships."

"That many?" Venard sat up, shutting his eyes a moment against dizziness. "Must have a bigger Underground than I thought."

"Comparatively few, but it allows us greater freedom of movement, greater capacity for cooperative effort. Most of the Martian commoners fell for the Zharkonistic program though." La Crue, who had been a psycho-medic in the guards, knew what he was talking about. "They were ripe for a crackpot philosophy like Zharkon provided. Too much specialization and not enough varied interests for individuals. Resultant mass hysteria. The old Zharkonian Royalists were just waiting in exile for such a break to move in. They've always resented the Martian revolution which established representative government on Mars. Anyway, there's another strong subversive Underground right here on Earth now, as well as on Mars and several other planets. We have cooked up a rather mad plan, or rather an old friend of yours has cooked it up. He won't even trust me with the details. He says only you and Kewpie Doll can carry it through."

"Let's get to that later," said Venard impatiently. "I want to know how Larson and I got out of that Concentration Camp explosion alive? Or did we?"

"The explosion itself wasn't sufficiently powerful to kill everyone, though it did a lot of damage. Partly luck, of course, that you survived. You would have been crushed when the structure crumbled after the explosion, if it hadn't been for this old friend of yours who dragged you two not only to safety, but to an escape tunnel

and here to the Underground; with help of course. There were some of us there to meet him."

"Who is this old friend?" said Venard dutifully.

"This old friend, Karl, was one of the Martie Guards. He didn't know you had the memory-crystal and you darn near blew him to pieces, too."

"One of the Martie Guards!" exclaimed Venard. "That's madness. You mean—?"

"That's right, Karl. You see this Underground of ours—this particular post, that is—is located pretty close to Concentration Camp 7. We've been digging an escape tunnel into Camp 7. This Martie was supposed to work with us. At a specified time, he was supposed to lead as many of the hostages as possible into this escape tunnel. But you beat us to it with the memory-sphere. The chaos helped the escape."

"But this old friend," persisted Venard. "Are you sure he's my old friend?"

"Yeah," grinned La Crue, "this old friend claims you're the only man living, Karl, who ever beat him ten consecutive games of sun-spot draw and—"

"Jhongan!" cried Venard. "Jhongan, that leathery monstrosity. That animated sponge. That — *he* was one of those lousy guards? Why—"

VENARD turned, and there was the Martian, his skin iridescent in the cold light. "Hello, you old space-eater," he said in that peculiar, slurred accent.

An entanglement of arms and tentacles to which Larson added his own scrawny arms. For a moment of joyous reunion it might have been the good old days when Jhongan and other Marties had been attending Terran Academy of Interplanetary Law. That had been a cultural policy, to exchange students in the various world academies.

"You were one of those Guards, and you got us out of that torture chamber?"

The Martie inclined his body sac in a nod. Few could converse with a Martie; it required a special skill. "I was planning it differently, as La Crue said. But it worked out just as well. La Crue has kept your consciousness submerged for three days. To build up strength. La Crue has also mentioned a plan. Not because I know you love flattery, I tell you that you

and Larson are the only ones for this job." Jhongan leaned forward and added: "It is possible, Karl, almost overnight, to save the Solar System and return to a peaceful, progressive Federation."

VENARD stared and Larson's little eyes became bright beads. Then Venard decided to take it easy, get the whole thing gradually. He was still in an unstable physical condition and too much of Jhongan's abruptness all at once might tip the scale back.

He rubbed his jaw. His eyes went again round the depressing reaches of the big Underground living quarters, or that particular part of it. Two women and a small ragged boy entered carrying crude cooking equipment. They smiled, and went through a small opening.

Larson mumbled, "I'd swear that girl was Glora Karstedt who just went through there." He hobbled across the shadowed cavern and disappeared after the woman, yelling "Hey! Hey, Glora. It's me, Kewpie Doll Larson. Remember—"

Jhongan said, "Not even a Solar War could change that guy."

La Crue shook his head slowly. "Wish all neurotics in the Undergrounds were as rational as old Kewpie Doll. We're having lots of psycho troubles down here in our Underground."

Jhongan let his heavy torso sink down between his four legs so that he now resembled a huge crab, while La Crue went on. He could wait. He was patient. He only hoped they would accept it when he presented the seemingly insane plan. La Crue explained, "Too much pressure down here. It's too unnatural an environment. No real hope either, so far, to relieve it. The complete abnormality of never getting a glimpse of the green hills of Earth, you know. They're developing what I call subterranean psychosis. A strange combination of claustro- and taphobia."

The psycho-medic looked pointedly at Jhongan. "And we've even had several outbreaks of planetary prejudice. Jhongan here looks just like any other Martie to an unintegrated mind. He's been physically attacked several times and almost killed since coming here from Mars a week ago. Special Underground passenger lines have been set up."

Venard stood up, stretched. "Trivia," he said finally. "That's what is driving all the Underground dwellers mad. False hope. Why not preach resignation?"

"After that speech you gave which stirred those people to sing the Terran Anthem, that is an obviously unrealistic statement on your part," said La Crue.

"We do have a chance," said Jhongan. "More than just a chance. I'll explain whenever you two pedantics get ready to listen."

"Where there's life, there's hope, eh?" said Venard sardonically. "That could also apply to a paramecium."

"There's more to this hope than you can ever guess," said Jhongan. "Listen, old friend. The rumor's true."

Venard stared, sagged. "You mean about Zharkon?"

"Yes," La Crue's black eyes shone. "Zharkon the Third's corto-brain half has been irreparably injured. The greatest conquering army in Solar History is temporarily leaderless."

Venard almost fell, caught himself by grasping La Crue's shoulder. "Shhhhh," he whispered. "Let me sleep."

"It's no dream," assured La Crue, while Jhongan gloated. "And Jhongan has a plan concerning the Zharkon. He won't tell me, or anyone else."

"I'll not even tell you, Venard," said Jhongan, "why you are to do what you are to do. If you are taken prisoner, they might put a thought recorder on you and find out the truth. That must not happen at any cost. The Solar System's future is at stake."

"If the Zharkon's brain is really injured, irreparably, why worry any more?" asked Venard.

"Because a new double-brain is developing in the breeding vats, and will soon be able to take office. Listen, old friend. The rumor's true because I was one of the subversives who planted the electron pellet beneath the Zharkon's throne. My five years of exemplary service to the Zharkonites was repaid. If the Zharkon dies, there may be temporary disorganization of the Zharkonistic government machine. During that brief upheaval, we might just possibly be able to organize resistance against the Martian hordes, although I don't know where we could find sufficient

weapons, ships, or even capable fighting men. Do you?"

"No," said Venard. "No."

"In the Zharkonian breeding room a new double-brain is being carefully incubated. The High Priests of Zharkon can easily transfer present worship from the dying old Zharkon to the new and very embryonic Zharkon even though it is under age. But the High Priests aren't sure that during that period of transition, the Allied Worlds of Earth, Ganymede, Callisto, Mercury, Neptune and the Asterites, may not be able to manage some kind of devastating revolt. Though that's too much of a gamble for us. You see, if my plan succeeds, it's absolutely certain that practically overnight Mars will become a lover of peace, and the System will return to a Democratic Federation."

"What is the plan?" said Venard impatiently. "Don't tell me you've found a magic wand somewhere?"

"It isn't really my plan," said Jhongan. "It's *their* plan—the High Priests of Zharkon. They're going to Venus. They're going to attempt an invasion of Solar Science City."

VENARD felt a little lost. His brain spun chaotically. "The Martians can't invade S.S.C. Even their science isn't big enough to crack open those force fields around S.S.C. That's the greatest fortress ever built in the System. And according to the original laws concerning S.S.C., no member or members of an aggressor planet can gain legal entry into S.S.C. for any reason. So what's the matter with the High Priests?"

"Nothing, Karl. They're going to try, and maybe they do have some secret method worked out. Whatever benefits to the System are available in S.S.C., those Martians are absolutely not entitled to them. The High Priests of Zharkon will have to force their way into S.S.C."

"Okay," shrugged Venard, "they can't. That settles that. Why do they want to get into—" He straightened, his eyes narrowed. "I get it. They want into the hetero-transplant wards. They want to replace the brain of the injured Zharkon with the one that's preserved in the body bank in S.S.C. Then no one will ever know that their Zharkon was ever injured. That's

clever—but they can't do it. Don't they know that?"

"They're desperate," said Jhongan. "That Zharkon double-brain in the S.S.C. body bank has been there for three hundred years. It's perfectly preserved and has never been injured. It was granted to S.S.C. by the Martian Democratic Presidium for research purposes."

"Then you want Larson and me to prevent them from getting the brain, or warn S.S.C. that the Martians are going to try to get it?"

"No," said Jhongan softly. "I hope you believe me. You see, your assignment is to help the High Priests get that brain out of S.S.C. Whatever the cost, that brain transplantation must be a success."

Venard said nothing. Through his stunned brain suspicion was creeping like a cloying disgusting fog. Maybe Jhongan was a counter-spy. And yet, he knew that couldn't be.

"I wish I could explain why," said Jhongan. "But, as I've said, if the Martians capture you and clamp a thought recorder on you, they'll know the truth and will not make the transplantation." Jhongan paused. His stalked eyes snaked down, probed deeply into Venard's. "Believe me, old friend," he said with a terrible passion. "This is the great test of the mutual trust our worlds held with each other before the war. Believe me, old friend. Say you believe me and will do this thing?"

Venard hesitated only an instant, then said slowly. "I believe you, Jhongan. We'll do it. But how?"

Jhongan's body sac sunk inward with a sigh of intense relief. "You and Larson have an advantage. Earth isn't an aggressor nation and therefore has legal right to enter S.S.C.—if there is some personal reason for doing so. Larson has that reason. If any person has missing body parts, he has the privilege of requesting entry into S.S.C. to replace that missing part."

"You mean, Larson," said Venard. "His missing left hand would give him entry not only into S.C.C. but directly into the hetero-transplant wards."

Jhongan bobbed his body sac. "He can probably get into S.C.C. if that sorrowful institution has retained even that much of its original purpose. After that, his duty will be to get the double-brain somehow,

and get it outside S.S.C. The High Priests of Zharkon will be outside trying to get in, if Larson times it right. He can give them the brain. Whether they'll let him live or not as a reward, I don't know. The sacrifice will be worth it, to a Guardsman. The High Priests will take that brain to Mars and transfer it to the dying Zharkon's brain case. If that is done, I assure you, peace throughout the Solar System will be only a matter of hours. But you and Larson will have to move fast. I know that the High Priests are probably heading for Venus right now."

"Sounds incredible," said Venard. "But, Jhongan, I believe you. We'll do it, of course. But I wish I knew why."

Jhongan said, "This is a point to regard—the reason is quite simple. You could figure it out, Venard, if you tried hard enough. Therefore, don't even try to evolve an answer. If you're captured by the Martians, you must know nothing."

"But if that's the case," said Venard suddenly, "then you—"

THE Martian trembled violently. A loud commotion suddenly spilled through the cave opening. Two men and a woman were leaping toward them. One wore a tattered Guardsman's uniform. The other man and woman were dressed in drab civvies.

"They're psychos who've escaped from the sanitarium," yelled La Crue. "They're Martophobes; they're after Jhongan! Stop 'em."

The mad Guardsman had a long alloy knife which Guardsmen formerly carried more for uniform decoration than for utilitarian purposes. He raised it as he leaped at Jhongan. The screaming woman and shouting man were also headed for Jhongan with clutching hands. The man's eyes gleamed insanely. The woman screeched, "Martie dog! Dirty, filthy Martie devil!"

Before either Venard or La Crue could intercept the man with the knife, he had thrown himself upon Jhongan's unresisting body. With screaming nerves, Venard saw the knife rise and fall again and again, savagely. He saw the green life juices spurt like a monstrous fountain. He heard himself swearing madly as he pulled the death-drenched Guardsman off Jhongan's twitching body, felt his fists crunch and

saw the psycho topple away, his face crushed in.

Venard and La Crue were leaning over Jhongan's punctured body sack. "He's dying," said La Crue hoarsely. "They die fast in Earth atmosphere. There's nothing anyone can do."

A tentacle reached up slowly, wrapped itself around Venard's hand. Venard heard the funny slurred tones of the Martie say in a dying whisper, "You promised. Don't fail. Promise you won't fail, Karl, old friend?"

"Yes," Venard gripped the tentacle. It went lax, plopped lifelessly down onto the cold damp stone.

"That's his answer," said Venard as he straightened wearily but with a stony resolution of face.

"Answer?" said La Crue. "To what?"

"I was going to ask him what would happen if he were captured by Martians. He knows the reason for this plan of helping transplant the Zharkon's brain. He answered that." He looked down at Jhongan. "He could have gotten away. He let the psycho kill him. Perhaps it was better that way. It saved him from having to kill himself."

La Crue, after a long silent moment, said, "How could anyone have planetary prejudice when a Martie is capable of such magnificent heroism for all civilized species?"

"They won't, someday," assured Venard, his jaw tense. "Someday, every species in the system will be judged only by their individual worth rather than by their physical appearance—thanks to the complete unselfishness of men like Jhongan."

"Anyway," said La Crue, "we know now that Jhongan's plan must be sound, if he believed in it so completely."

"Yes," said Venard, "we know now" He saw Larson stagger a little as he emerged from a tunnel mouth into the cavern with a half-emptied plastic bottle of *stihn* in one hand. Hanging on the little man's other arm was a rather shapely girl. She was looking at Larson with curiosity more than interest.

When Larson saw Jhongan, dead, the bottle of *stihn* bounced on the stone floor. The girl whirled away from him, uttering a sharp cry of protest that died as she saw Larson's violent reaction.

Then he came up close to Venard, cold sober now, and waited. He was ready now, ready for anything.

Abruptly, Venard said, "We're going to Venus. Tonight. Come on!"

"Okay, just a minute while I—what? Venus? Why?" Larson stared. His little eyes shifted to Jhongan. "About that plan of his, huh? I'm ready. Let's go."

Venard told him everything he knew, with intermittent injections from La Crue.

"It's about as clear as that Venusian mud's gonna be," said Larson.

"You need a left hand. That'll get us inside S.S.C. or rather get you inside. We hope. A few have taken advantage of their body bank facilities; but S.S.C. doesn't encourage it. There are stories horror coming out of S.S.C. And you know the one I was telling you about the concept of an alien God."

"Yeah," breathed Larson. "That alien god. I don't like that."

La Crue cut in, "A small Scouter's ready to blast off from a subterranean cradle near here. The Underground has several of them cradled at strategic points for emergencies."

"Let's go, Kewpie Doll," snapped Venard. "And don't try to guess why. Although in your case, I can't see the danger."

"Goodby," said La Crue as a Guard appeared to lead them through secret tunnels to their wating Scouter. "And good luck . . ."

IV

THERE ARE NO ADVENTURES in space. Either a space-flight is safe monotony, or quick death. But as the two Guardsmen approached the vast mysterious dome of S.S.C. somewhere in the Mesozoic nightmare, the vaporous, steaming, endlessly stretching rain-forest of Venus, they stumbled with wracking weariness. Reptile-infested swamps and steaming seas, foul-smelling, rotten—it was an incredibly perilous planet.

For five hours they had burned their way through giant flora and fauna and sweat, H-guns hot with almost steady usage. And then Venard finally parted some phosphorescent, glowing lichen and there the gigantic dome rose up and up and

lost itself in thick mist. But between them and their goal was a hellish nightmare barrier, spilling stinking muck into a placidly steaming sea.

Larson mopped at mud and sweat-slimed face, stared in fearful awe. Venard swore. They were blocked by a moat, a green, oozing mud-river, flowing oilily. From out of it, projected huge spines, ribs, and warts covering towering, brilliant, multi-colored mounds—that *moved!* Scaly mountains of shifting, radioactive lime. "Giant mollusc bed!" gasped Venard. Low tide now, but during high tide the sea on their right would back up this far. But high tide was hours distant.

There were thousands of the molluscs, every size, shape and color. Venard's head went quickly to either side. "It goes out of sight both ways, Kewpie Doll. Into the sea and into the swamp. Trapped!"

Larson squirmed, muttering, "Them bivalves are flesh-eaters. Look!"

A *gruoon*, a flying reptile, had started a dive across the thick air toward the fungus-covered dome of S.S.C. A giant bivalve, at least fifty meters wide, snapped open. Its lifting shell-half dripped an avalanche of tendrils and muddy slime. A pliable snout whipped upwards. On its end, a formless pliant mouth full of row after row of rasp-like teeth, closed on the *gruoon*, sucked it into the pallid grey pulsating interior of the bivalve. Its shells closed with slow certainty on the writhing, screaming *gruoon*.

"We can't make that trek on foot, Kewpie Doll. Got to get back to the ship. We landed on the wrong side. Got to rush things though, and get the Zharkon's brain before the Marties try illegal entry and ruin everything. Come on. I'll get you inside S.S.C., don't worry."

"I'll worry either way—hey, listen!" He froze. His eyes rolled up and followed the sound droning invisibly above the impenetrable envelope of mist—the long *hissshowwww* of a decelerating Martian war-ship.

"That's the boys," growled Venard darkly. His jaw knotted. "Not time to go back to the ship. Probably five hours—if we made it at all." His eyes studied the hundred meter-wide barrier of quivering, snapping, hungry molluscs. "I wonder," he murmured, "if we could do it?"

But Larson, moaning and trembling, was already waist-deep in the iridescent slime. Venard grinned and followed jerkily. "We'll try to crawl from one to the other," he managed to say. "So keep your remaining hand free. Don't draw your blaster unless you have to."

Followed by Larson, now behind him, Venard started climbing gingerly up the jagged, weirdly-glowing mollusc. Larson puffed painfully, swearing. They were half way across the shell before it shifted. They crouched down, hanging on desperately. Around them, shells snapped open and shut hungrily. Mouthed probosci were snaking about, dragging things out of the air.

"If we can stay on these things," gasped Venard. "Haven't seen any of them interested in each other. This baby has a keen sense of taste and smell; not much sense of touch, though."

Their shell suddenly rocked violently. The two Guardsmen squeezed themselves between two roughly porous spines for support, drew their blasters. The top half of the bivalve was slowly lifting.

They clung precariously by friction alone while the shell shook, rose higher and higher. It shifted, and fell so that its hinge was uppermost. Larson yelped, slipped, almost fell within reach of the pulsing pink-tissued maw. His face was dead white.

The gigantic pinkish foot of the mollusc was oozing out and out, away from them toward the opposite embankment. It stopped almost across the bed; and when it withdrew toward them, in short contracting jerks, it left behind, cemented against the shell of another mollusc, a long strand of fleshy cable as big around as Larson's arm.

The mussel's foot contained a narrow groove ending at a gland which exuded a sticky substance, much like liquid glue. This hardened almost instantly when exposed to air. Their shell had placed this foot against the other mollusc, and the sticky material was forced along the groove, touched the other mollusc, adhered and hardened. Then by slowly drawing back the foot, their own shell had, with astounding speed, spun a strong cable almost across the moat.

"An anchor," shuddered Larson. "It's

put out an anchor just like a ship."

"That cable's more than just an anchor, Kewpie Doll. Evolution's given him such a weak foot compared to its body weight; it has to throw out a cable and drag itself from one place to another."

The cable was tightening. The pitted shell to which they miraculously clung began to shift slightly as the cable stretched taunt. "This is too lucky a break," groaned Larson. "Getting a free ride across like this. There's a catch to it, somewhere. Venus ain't operatin' no free ferry service."

"And that's the catch!" Venard pointed. "We fastened to that other mollusc. Instead of us moving, we're pulling that other oyster out of its bed!"

Their living anchor base lifted upward slowly with a long sucking sound. Their own mollusc wasn't making enough headway even to pull himself up over other shells. Its anchor base was too weak. But not passive. It reacted violently.

"Watch out!" screamed Larson, shrinking.

The mollusc to which the cable was fastened suddenly opened its giant shells, snapped them shut with a thunderous crack. The effect was to send its great weight in a flying jump to the right about fifteen meters. The cable parted with a sighing whine, whipped out, round and back in a deadly arc. Larson screamed again. Only once. The cable swept him away into the mud. Multicolored, squid-like faces sprouting thousands of powerful filaments, writhed hungrily toward him as he struggled briefly.

A choking, helpless horror went through Venard as he saw the bivalve snap open, and then, a snaking proboscis with the filamented mouth whip out and close on Larson's twisting body to jerk him down with lightning swiftness into that pulsating abyss of hungry flesh.

It had happened awfully fast to the toughest little guy in the System.

TOO FAST for Venard even to try. Against invincible odds to avert his death. Eaten alive by a clam. He tried to think of things that would compensate as the mollusc spun another cable. He concentrated his eyes and thought on the taut flesh cable the bivalve had spun, the



one remaining link with S.S.C. and the fulfillment of Jhongan's unknown plan. First Jhogan, then the Kewpie Doll . . . He had to keep on to make their sacrifice seem worth while. Theirs and billions of others throughout the System.

The mollusc had reached the end of the cable. Its unpredictable nerve centers had decided, however, to settle down right there. Its migration was over, maybe for years. And Venard was still about fifty feet from the other side of the moat.

Acting on impulse, Venard hooked his arms over the cable and leaped toward the bank. He slid wildly, with little friction, along the new slickness of the cable strands, plopped into the mud. He crawled frantically up onto the thick vegetation just as a univalvular mouth missed him by inches, tried again. He burned it and the charred snout curled away.

He was across, lying against the mossy slimy uprising shell of S.S.C. But so what? He had two hands. Larson, their entry ticket, was gone. He steeled himself, didn't let himself think about it anymore. He brought the H-gun on down in a quick savage gesture across his left wrist. . .

He didn't lose consciousness. It was just a quick, jabbing, burning agony. He looked at the charred stub—and then quickly swallowed five para-pills. They calmed him, enabled him to climb to his feet and follow the elevated ramp until he came to the ingress to the scanning chamber.

He stood inside, before the wall, his legality being checked. The chromoplex room was barren except for the telescreen and the opening of the tubecar that would plunge him through the magnetized vacuum tube into the heart of S.S.C.—and to what?

Tendrils of a vague fear oozed insidiously into his mind. He couldn't shake free from a superstitious sensing of evil hidden danger. He heard the faint murmuring of concealed photo-electric mechanisms and relays. He was being thoroughly scanned.

A milky opalescence filled the screen, and coalesced; a misty outline solidified, looked stoically at Venard. Recognition shocked the Guardsman. It was Bronlen, greatest Solar physicist Terra had ever produced. Bronlen had been summoned to

S.S.C. ten years ago to become its Director. Consequently, like all who came here, he had dropped out of all sight and sound. But how he had changed! Only a few among the allied worlds had ever come to S.S.C. for a long time now, even for such a vitally needed thing as a body part transplantation. S.S.C. had become a place of mystery and strange fear. A place shunned and hated.

The austere, smoothly-aged face seemed, somehow, not human. Unalive, a dull conscienceless face that shouldn't be Bronlen at all. The bloodless lips parted.

"You may enter, barbarian. You are entitled to have your left hand replaced, thought it's too bad you decided to annoy us, and didn't resign yourself to your barbaric fate of one-handedness like most other barbarians of the System have wisely decided to do. However, upon completion of the transplantation, you will be transported immediately and directly back out of S.S.C. Now the tubecar will take you directly to the hetero-transplant ward."

The screen faded and Venard, boiling with inner rage and hatred, entered the tubecar. Then, desperate helplessness as he felt the tingling numbness settling over his brain. Concealed hypnotic frequencies. They were blanking him out!

V

SOMETIME LATER HE WAS violently awakened by hands shaking him. "Karl! . . . Karl!" There was a terrible urgency in the low, rich voice. But this was mad dreaming! He'd never really expected to hear this voice again. Subconsciously, buried deep down, he had perhaps entertained the idea that he might see her again, but—

"Karl, hurry and wake up, for the love of Heaven! They're coming back. I've got to explain before they get here!"

Venard opened his eyes, sat bolt upright on a kind of operating table. It was her all right. Vale. She was bending over him. Strangely, she didn't seem to have changed much. She appeared older, a little, with some of the blue fire gone from her eyes. "Hello, Vale," he finally managed to say rather thickly. He didn't want to sound that way. He wanted to sound cynical, tough. He didn't at all.

In her drab grey interne's robe and cap she stood trembling above him, eyes wild with fear. She shoved his H-gun at him. "I don't know why you came here, but take this gun. You'll need it. I know you didn't come here just for another hand."

Wordlessly, he took the gun, hid it under his tunic. He flexed his—yes, they had transplanted the hand. He clenched his new fist on the H-gun. The whole transplantation process probably hadn't taken more than an hour. Incredibly advanced healing acceleration—amazing biochemical and surgical science. Just an example of the knowledge held imprisoned inside S.S.C. Knowledge that should have been given out to the Fédération.

"Vale. You don't seem the same. Why didn't you come back? You promised."

Her eyes shone wetly, and her full lips quivered. "Oh, how I wanted to come back. I tried. But it completely ended my free agency of will and mind." Then her voice became harsh and urgent.

He swung around as she said tautly, "No time for reminiscence. I know you. You're here for some desperate, mad reason or other. But it won't go here, Karl. S.S.C. is completely under its power. You haven't a chance, nothing human has a chance against it. That's why I never even tried to get word to you at first, while I still had a chance. I knew that if you came here to help me, it would only get you too. None of us here can do anything now, or ever. We're all mindless slaves."

"Except you," commented Venard sarcastically. "I.Q. Saunders. But then, you always did have a mind of your own."

Her eyes darted wildly down toward the paneled door of the operating room. "That puzzles me, Karl. My full mental faculties returned to me seven days ago, Earth time. It was a flash of white flame. And it's hold over me dropped away. But it's influence is coming back, creeping in again. Oh, it's horrible, horrible! Karl, you've got to—"

Venard felt a chill of alien cold. Seven days ago, Earth time. "The memory-crystal," he whispered. "That's the night I smashed the Venusian memory-crystal."

"Don't talk mystical nonsense," she said frenziedly. "When they come to send you out of S.S.C., don't try any mad scheme.

Just go, and please say or do nothing. Just leave S.S.C. without question. Please Karl."

He liked to hear that kind of talk, especially from Vale. He stood up; he was a little weak. "I came here to get that preserved Zharkonian brain from the body banks. I'm going to give it to the Martians and they're going to replace the present Zharkonian ruler's injured brain with it. You can believe anything, even that I'm a spy working for the Marties, if you want to. Jhongan said—"

Vale interrupted. "That's the brain we have preserved here. That of the first Zharkon. An experiment in bio-chemistry. They actually succeeded in developing a synthetic brain." Her lips twisted thoughtfully. "Yes, I can see Jhongan's reasons. Ingenious, and it probably would work, but—listen!"

She gripped his shoulders. The touch did things to Venard's nervous system. Forgotten things. "But it's useless," she said, "for you to try such a scheme here, Karl. The Martians, for all their military might, are just insignificant pawns."

Venard exclaimed, "Martians—just pawns! You haven't been around lately. Those babies have taken over everything, and they intend to keep it. This other menace . . . don't be so mysteriously evasive, Vale. Who, or what, is this *it*? Don't tell me the Martie desert tribes' rumors about an alien god controlling S.S.C. is authentic!"

She tried to answer, but she swayed, shut her eyes, and clenched small white fists. Her body twitched violently, blood drained from her face. He shot an arm about her waist, but she was stiff, cold and unyielding. And this was too abnormal. Her head fell back over his arm. Then she opened her eyes slowly. They were glazing, dulling, as though being seared by a minute but-horrific flame. Her lips moved stiffly. "It—back—jo—jo—"

He was holding her that way when the door slid noiselessly open and they filed through.

HE HATED THEM thoroughly—the weird polyglot of selfish recluses, without purposes here in their rotten, sequestered borough. Greatest minds of the System withholding their marvels of science.

The Martie surgeon, the Mercurian medic, the Ganymedian and Saturnian, slippery, metallic and spidery. And weirdest of all, the Jovian liquescent brain in its square, black cubicle body . . . a faceless, eyeless, limbless parasite. An incredibly specialized thinking formulae sentiently bubbling in the arms of the Martian medic.

On its own world, there were special mechanisms designed to carry these Jovians around. But here in S.S.C. it evidently utilized personnel for transportation. No Jovian had ever visited another world in the System, and vice versa. They were neutrals with a strict mutual code of hands off with all other planets.

They were the sociopaths of the System. They had never entered the Federation, even on paper. Isolationists who—

THEN he knew. Without that clue from poor Vale, he might never have found out the truth until it was too late. If it wasn't already much too late.

"Jo—Jo—" just what she had been trying to tell him. The menace to the Solar System that made even the Martians only insignificant pawns were the unknown completely ignored Jovians!

The Martians pawns of these little—impossible. No, not impossible. The Jovians were mysteriously uncatalogued. They possessed telepathic power by which they communicated with each other. But no being of any other planet had ever been able to communicate with a Jovian—as far as anyone knew. It was said that it demanded some time for a Jovian to familiarise itself with highly individualized brain-wave patterns.

But when they did, they were supposed to be able to control that mind—

Venard shivered, uncontrollably. The horrible implication, the tremendous scope of possibility flooded open, poured fear in Venard's desperate, groping brain. Having never entered in Solar politics, having always been withdrawn, unobtrusive, and silent on their dim dark world, they had been theoretically harmless. But what if they secretly controlled key figures in the System? Here, in S.S.C., they could have enslaved the greatest weapons and knowledges of science of the entire Solar System, and from there—

Vale had stiffened in his arms, fell

away from him. She was standing there coldly watching him with no warmth and no feeling, suddenly an alien antagonistic being. The others ringed him, silently waiting and watching.

Venard's semantically-trained mind reacted quickly and efficiently. The Jovian needed a certain unspecified time to solve the intricacies of Venard's highly individualized brain patterns. In that uncertain interim, he had to get the brain of Zharkon I out of S.S.C. to the waiting Martians. If they were waiting. And, if this Jovian mentality in a cube controlled S.S.C., there was only one possible action. Capture the Jovian. With the dark world being in his power, he could control S.S.C.—that is, until the Jovian familiarized itself with his brain waves, and all the complex inter-relations of the incredibly intricate switch-board of his cerebrum.

Nothing could comprehend all the circuits in its entire complexity. The Jovian power lay in its specialized ability to probe into key centers and control them. If Venard did control the Jovian, it would be only until it grasped his individualized peculiarities of rhythm and circuits. It had taken quite long, seven days, to renew its control of Vale's big I. Q. even when it had already controlled it once. But his—how long? Maybe days, hours. Maybe only minutes. He was no complex cerebral organism.

Anyway, his H-gun suddenly in his hand, he leaped for the Martian who held the Jovian. Venard had gambled often.

A wave of evil and rather horrid thought struck him along with a snarl of material resistance from the polyglot of beings who opposed him. The Jovian knew his purpose; its sycophants were resisting him madly. Sycophants—the greatest mentalities of the System, pawns of a six-inch cube!

Venard, too late, tried to avoid the Martian's appendage raking at his H-gun; but it struck savagely downward and the H-gun fell away under the whip-like force, clattered across the plastic floor. He buried a fist in the body sac, and the Martian toppled away. Venard drove after it, clutching at the Jovian in its tentacles; and he felt it against his hands. He pulled, strained, swore. The little metallic Mercurian whined thinly and swirled its fila-

ments at Venard. He pulled the Jovian under one arm, hugged it against his side, shivering; and then he grabbed a shocking electrifying handful of the Mercurian and wrenched savagely. A hot, leadish fluid boiled from the gaping hole as the Mercurian slumped.

Venard fell away from the Martian, holding the Jovian frantically, crawled dizzily along the floor as he scrambled for the H-gun. Two other figures were diving for it. Vale, and the Neptunian spiderman. It wasn't really Vale now. It was just a segment of the Jovian's mind, but it wasn't easy to swing a short solid blow that connected scientifically with her small delicate jaw so that she slumped soundless. His hand went on around, gripped the grey furred neck of the spiderman, twisted it. Mandibles jerked apart, and a poisonous green juice streamed outward, missed Venard's face by inches.

Then he had the H-gun in his hand; he pressed it against the black faceless cube. He sent out quick stabbing thought messages and commands at random. He didn't know whether the H-gun's electri-power unit would effect the Jovian's shell or not. But he soon found the potentiality. "Call them off, or I'll destroy you," he kept thinking frantically.

OTHERS had been summoned; a number of weird beings jammed the door into the operating room. But it was plain that the Jovian was vulnerable to the H-gun. Its one weapon was thought control. It had no others at all. Until it could solve the enigmatic intricacies of Venard's neuro-cerebral circuits, it was helpless. Until then, Venard controlled S.S.C. Until—then?

The minions of the Jovian were frozen in tense silent waiting; motivated by a single thought command, they stood taut, watching him dully.

Already he sensed the dark hate and growing frenzy of the Jovian rising. Evidently it was figuring out its problem.

Holding the Jovian tightly, the H-gun trained directly on it, Venard ran out the door while the knot of Solar beings parted before him in a jerky weaving enslavement. He shuddered. These were super-8—Planet Stories—Spring

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minds—these wolfish, silently waiting ghouls. Every conceivable size and form that crawled, hopped, floated and wobbled, every type of Solar intellect from ingenious plant life to pure energy entities pulsing whitely in mid-air. All equally helpless to act until the Jovian could act.

The Martian medic had recovered and was tottering blearily on its four contracting legs. "You," Venard gestured at the Martian, at the same time jiggling the Jovian suggestively. "Lead me to the body bank section. I'm after the brain half of Zharkon I. Quick, on the double! Or I blast your Jovian dictator in a million pieces."

The Martie started down the vaulted hall, with Venard close behind him. And the rustling progress of all the others followed expectantly. A sharp, jolting shock rocketed between his temples; the Jovian had connected with a sneak punch. How long would the Jovian need? It would be easier to work against time if he knew how much time he had.

They passed massive walls lined with huge, sealed and refrigerated sterile banks containing spare body parts of every intellectual type of being among all the Solar Worlds. Bank after bank filled with fantastic arrays of alien body parts. One bank contained, for example, every variety of articulation; among these were every kind of human hand. Doubtless his hand had come from here. Then his reluctant Martie medic guide paused before one bank especially reserved for the synthetically developed mass of convoluted tissue known as the double brain of Zharkon I, three times larger than a human brain. It boasted two completely separated brain sections, the thalamic and the cortical. The lack of ability to integrate these two seats of pure primitive emotion and pure reason resulted in the variable, unpredictable, unstable actions of most humans or other intellects. The Zharkon could turn on either and create desired levels of reaction—almost an ultimate free agency, or free will set-up. This was one of the first developed Zharkon double brains. A thousand years old.

The Martie opened the bank at Venard's command, lifted it out in its sealed, self-containing unit. The Martie adjusted temperature and self-feeding gauges that

would keep the brain preserved in transit for an unspecified length of time.

Venard staggered then, and grabbed for support where there was none. A thick slimy blackness closed in. The damn Jovian! He could feel the dark, vast depths of its alien mind opening, then merging with his own. A vaulted abyss of mental perils loomed that were thought-shattering. He felt himself falling, falling through mental parsecs. White-hot knives slashed deep into his flashing brain, wrenching, stabbing. He sobbed for air, staggered through a veiled mist in some strange and hideous mental land.

There were moaning forces of evil screaming through tortured nerves. And somehow, he was crawling through this thick, swirling evil mental land. A red roaring throbbed in his ears. His heart pumped desperately as he crawled toward something that fought him with all the strength of fear, black hate, and a massive, evil will. Huge, surrealistic, he saw his hand before his burning eyes; they were like disembodied parts of himself. Far out ahead of him, digging, clawing futilely toward some goal he had to attain. He couldn't remember what it was.

His hands gripped white-hot metal, but he couldn't let go or he would fall back away from the thing he must reach. Stench of burning flesh clouded his eyes. Pain rocketed back into his face. He couldn't fight it! He was losing, failing, sinking back and down. Then his hands were beating empty space, and he was toppling into a black well with a bottom of—there was no bottom. With a hopeless, despairing cry, he writhed frantically, found a jagged edge and hung on, straining, every nerve screaming, at a scaly wall that shivered, heavily alive.

BUT his hands were slipping; he knew he would fall into the well. And once he fell into that blackness, he was gone forever. He was in a world of thought, and in that world he had no defenses, not against such a highly specialized entity of thought as the Jovian. Yes—that was the goal—he was trying to reach the Jovian. That was the symbol. But he could never reach it. The pain was too great. Pain could kill. Shock could stop his brain and heart.

"Vale!"

His voice was harsh, despairing. Had he called? Had he sent that wild cry ringing out toward someone, anyone—?

"Vale!"

But she could not help him now! She was even further down in this black hell of the Jovian's. She was already lost . . .

"Vale . . ."

The voice was weak, now, weak as is the voice of one dying. Black horror rose about him—

Then, in an abrupt flooding surge of joyous change, the blackness was blotted out by light.

VI

A SOFT, DISTANT SHIMMERING GLOW pierced through in arrows of jeweled brilliance. A swirling mist swam toward and around him. It was a beautiful, soft enchantment. A green world of gently swaying fronds and phosphorescent bubbles climbing and bursting in clouds of multi-colored flame.

It was an underwater city, a delicate coraled Babylon of some alien beauty, with avenues of high dainty ferns swaying to the urgings of invisible currents. Enmeshed in this strange ensorcelled dream of jeweled, glimmering, glittering wonder, Venard's mind sped through emerald halls . . .

And suddenly, by his side, there was Vale—her presence mistily improbable, and yet somehow definite. He could not see, he could not feel, but he could know—

He and Vale were being summoned, called by frantically urging minds.

They floated into a room that was nebulous, quivering now into plainer sight, now withdrawing into indefiniteness. Then Venard saw a brilliant flame that grew, hardened, crystallized, shone brighter and more brilliantly strange. Mists of argent light, then floating shadowy shapes of incredible delicacy swam into view. He knew it now.

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as flower stems, motioned with desperate urgency.

The reality of the apparent fantasy hit Venard like a projectile from space with a shockingly familiar voice, a mental voice from the dead:

"Hey, Karl! It's me, Kewpie Doll Larson. We gotta move fast, see? It's me and the Venusian Sea people. It's us! We're helping you fight the Jovian."

Venard thought frantically, "How? You're—you're supposed to be dead!

"No, Karl. That was just a gag. I burned loose the muscle hinges that holds them clams together, but I still couldn't get out. Then, when the tide came and backed up into that moat, the Venusians swam up and rescued me. They knew what had happened; they used their thought-crystals. Listen, it ain't fantastic at all. Them memory spheres are mental power synthesizers, just like dynamos. The Sea People have been working on these things secretly to fight the Jovians with. Listen, Karl. You're the instrument, see? We all concentrate on our crystals and you can blast that infernal black box to Kingdom Come. I'll be in there with you in two shakes of a three-tailed *ghroat*. I'm just outside S.S.C. now! Give him hell, Karl!"

"But—how?" his mind almost gasped.

Then he heard Vale's laugh—and it was a joyous thing. "Too many people have told you too little," her message came through. "Come—we haven't much time now. You must trust these people. They will show you how . . ."

Arm in arm, then, they soared up into green translucence. Curiously, as they rose, the green grew deeper, darker, and choking terror tore once again at Venard's throat—a terror cunningly without reason.

He suddenly felt the dark box nestling against his ribs. Had he been carrying the Jovian even down among the Sea-people?

And where was Vale? The warming sense of her presence was withdrawn. Fear stabbed into him again. Fear—and those tendrils of white-hot anguish.

He was back in the body bank . . . alone . . . with the Jovian. Black fury burst once more against his reeling mind, but through it rose the faintest of echoes: "Give him hell, Karl!"

Energy, strength, courage, power flooded through him. Still, there was no reality, no visible enemy, no material hall with body banks and mosaic walls and solid plastic floors. Out of a black sea bobbed a cloudy sphere of coruscating evil hate. Venard leaped, his body bending through an arc of torture. He had the sphere in his dripping hands, holding it high. He must hurl it from him, smash it, but it clung to him, seemed a part of him. Blindness thickened his sight; then, as it thinned, he blinked. The Jovian cubicle body was smashing against the high, up-curving wall of the buried body bank hall in S.S.C.

A dazzling greenish glare exploded in a bright crackling flame that flung him full length. In his mind burst an ultimate unhuman cry of raw agony from the Jovian. It climbed beyond his auditory range so high that a stark-shock wrenched his spine and shook his brain in his skull. And the Jovian spewed out in a pulsating, semi-liquid mass, ran down the smoothly polished mosaic.

Venard rubbed his burning eyes, as he sat there wearily trying to grasp some general understanding. His body was terribly tired. The Martian medic helped him to his feet, but he couldn't stand alone. While he swayed dizzily, the Martie's body sac nodded gently. "Thank you, Lieutenant Venard. S.S.C. is free at long last. We had abandoned all hope. A burial place of knowledge is always a final graveyard of hope."

VENARD was leaning wearily against the wall and the Martian medic was lifting the first Zharkon's brain-sac into the refrigerated bank when Larson and Vale came running down the hall. Larson was a spectacle for sore eyes. His uniform was waving tatters, his skin a splotched mass from digestive acids of the carnivorous clam. Vale wrapped unforgotten arms around Venard's neck and for a while he forgot Larson, the Zharkon's brain. He forgot almost everything.

"You defeated it," she breathed proudly, eyes shining. "You defeated it! We couldn't help here in S.S.C. We were powerless. But, for that few days when I was free, you would never have known about it."

"He defeated it?" howled Larson from a raw, flaming face. "I defeated it. Me and the Sea People did, that is. But we ain't got any time to argue about who gets the medals. The Martians are outside with a couple of Battlewagons. They're setting up electro-cannons, vibratory beams, oxo-hydro guns, and God alone knows what they got in secret. They're gonna break in here or bust."

The Martian medic said, "They can't, of course. The force fields and—"

Larson bawled out an ungently, "Don't be so smug! Comin' all the way here I bet they've got some secret weapon."

Venard said curtly, "Contact them! I suggest we tell them we'll give them their Zharkon the First's blasted brain. I'm beginning to get brains on the brain!"

They hurried to a nearby room containing an inner-SSC communication set. The Martian medic nervously switched threw to S.S.C. control study. "This is Yhongar in the Transplant Wards," he said. "Lieutenant Venard of the Guards and an—er—Mr. Lawson have defeated the Jovian, as you probably know. Director Bronlen, are you all right, sir?"

Director Bronlen's austere face swam into view, changed now. It was the face of a man who has learned the ultimate meanings of slavery and freedom of thought. It smiled with new hope, and with gentle, but firm strength. "Everything is all right now, Yhongar. However, two Martian warships have been reported just outside S.S.C."

"Yes, Director Bronlen," said the Martian. "They intend to attack S.S.C. in an attempt to obtain the brain of Zharkon I. Lieutenant Venard says we should give them the brain. Lieutenant Venard, could you explain to S.S.C. Director H. Bronlen the reason for this proposed action?"

Venard hesitated, flushed weakly. "I—really don't know, exactly, that is. A Martian subversive, Jhongan, working with the Allies, said to give the Martian High Priests every possible assistance in obtaining the Brain. He said that if the replacement in the present Zharkon is accomplished, complete peace would return to the System."

Bronlen's face remained puzzled, groping. "There must be some explanation.



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We owe you and Sergeant Larson an infinite debt of gratitude, but unless some logical reason is given for this unorthodox procedure, I'm afraid—"

Vale stepped forward. "I think I can explain Jhongan's purpose in wanting this transplantation to succeed."

"I.Q. Saunders," smiled Venard wryly.

"Speak," said Bronlen. "But hurry. The Martians are preparing to attack. For all we know, they may have developed some kind of atomic-penetrator."

"Well," began Vale, "the fanatical Zharkonian Royalists thought they had all authentic Martian historical documents destroyed and forgotten. But they didn't. Their own interpretation of history is based on primitive myth, legends of race and ancestor worship—the old war gods of slaughter and conflict, the hero-worship of victorious armies and of individuals killed in battle. Greatly similar to the old Nazi and Norse ideologies. So, naturally, they didn't want the newly conditioned masses acquainted with *true* Martian history which is just the opposite, being one of steady progress and peaceful aims designed for the betterment of all peoples. But Jhongan's underground faithfuls on Mars made it a point to preserve key historical Martian documents, evidently, so that they have known all the time the exact nature of the thousand-year-old brain of Zharkon I."

She paused, while Venard lit up a para-ette to steady his shaky nerves. He grinned at her thinly. "I bet you could quote the whole Solar Encyclopedia," he snapped.

She smiled at him and continued. "The amazing part is that the Zharkonian leaders forgot real history themselves. Fell for their own propaganda, which is so often the case. They believe in the myths and legends they've resurrected—in part. It's obvious they've forgotten or they certainly wouldn't be attempting this transplantation. You see, we've studied that incredible double-brain thoroughly in connection with socio-economic history of Zharkon the First's era. It was one of the first double-brain experiments and wasn't entirely successful. There was an uncontrollable influence of the thalamic half over the cortex half. You see, Zharkon I was beneficently pathological as a ruler."

"Pathological," exclaimed Director Bronlen.

"Yes. A fanatical pacifist, who went into daily trances and preached the sacred brotherhood of all races, creeds and colors. But the methods he used were impractical and revealed unintegration of his brain sections. So you can see what will happen if that kind of cortex gets in control of the present militaristic Martian government."

"A pacifist! Fanatical—pathological—" Venard grinned broadly. Larson laughed hoarsely. The Martian swelled his body sac with pride and renewed hope. Bronlen's face appeared to glow with admiration for Vale's analysis, sharpened to sudden decision. "I am going to contact the Martians immediately," he said. "I'll inform them that rather than have conflict here within the cloistered halls of science, we'll give them the brain of Zharkon I—without question. This will probably inflate their paranoic egos considerably."

The teleaudio faded and almost immediately, several attendants of as many planetary types in interne's gowns came down the long hall and took the huge Martian double brain away to the arrogantly and triumphantly waiting Martian Priests. Their warships blasted off without delay, atomic-interplanetary drives at full acceleration, to transplant the brain into the body of their incapacitated war leader—to transform him into an incurable, pathological, fanatical lover of peace at any cost—a mind that regarded war for any cause at any time more terrible than a cosmic plague.

Meanwhile, the Solar Federation was made acquainted with the real and far more terrifying threat existing on the obscure, dark and mysterious world of the Jovians. Panic swept over these worlds, realizing as they did that there was no way to combat the pure thought power of the Jovians.

However, the Venusian Sea People had found out via S.S.C. about the thralldom of that citadel by the Jovian there, and, realizing the tremendous threat to the System, they retreated into their strange, deep laboratories to manufacture the memory crystals by the thousands. The mystic little globes would enable other than Jovian minds to achieve a unity of mental strength.

In the hands of millions of Solarians, they would mean inevitable defeat for the outnumbered Jovians.

AT AN unspecified date after the Jovian defeat on Luna, in the synthetic wonderland of Escapeasies and pleasure palaces, terraced gardens and the magnificent space-view translucent dome of the resort in Theophilus Crater, three figures stood on the crater's colossal rim.

Venard's arm was around Vale's shoulders as they stared with unshakable awe into the huge vault of the sky enclosing them in a black and gigantic hollow, sprinkled with the white dust of the stars. Nearby, seated on a pneumatic couch with a bottle of *stihn* in one hand and a memory-crystal in the other, Louie Larson was realizing an ultimate kind of hedonistic satisfaction with life.

It was the middle of the Lunar night, and the terrific cold crept in, even through the laced seams of the dome.

"Go ahead, kiss," said Larson in a bored fashion. "Don't mind me. You two don't know what love really means, either of you." He was looking into the memory crystal from which he never took his eyes. A willowy, flowery, translucent green body undulated in its misty depths.

Vale smiled boldly up at Venard. Venard managed to shoot a quick grin at Larson. "I suppose you're going to say that Venusian Sea Woman who fell for you looks something like Glora Karstedt?"

"Don't joke about pure, cosmic love such as mine," warned Larson dreamily. "It's a love of pure thought, a spiritual delight. There never was any Glora Karstedt. I guess you'd call Glora a symbol, a dream woman. An' I've found the ideal at last, friends. Her name is Ulolalahr. Her thoughts alone in my mind are pure ecstasy."

Larson arose slowly and austere and walked to the panel. "This physical kind of thing is positively disgustin'," he said.

"I don't agree with him at all," said Vale, closing her eyes and puckering up her lips.

A few seconds later, Venard breathed a long, "Wheeeooooow. What an I.Q.! Ideally Qualified."

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THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 5)

sand dollars to deliver one Hindu on Venus. At a rate like that it would take fifty thousand space-ships to relieve the pressure of population for a grand total of four hundred and fifty billion dollars. Just where would you get that much heavy sugar? And, if you don't think they would get into a fight over the matter, what do you call what Hindus and Moslems are doing now? A meeting of the peace, friendship, and brotherly love uplift league? Don't be silly.

Respectfully,

—EDWIN SIGLER

WANTS THE VERY BESS

1850 Sacramento St.
San Francisco, Calif.

FOUL FIEND PAYNE:

Bess Buxom glanced up from her work. She was engaged, under my supervision, in constructing a curvilinear-vibrato-synchro-super-omegatron. A cute little trick, indeed. I mean the machine.

She winked at me seductively and placed her sensuously curved scarlet lips close to my ear so they could not overhear and exact their brutal vengeance.

"Tonight!" she whispered. "Tonight, oh my beloved, let us taste of the forbidden delights!"

"You mean—?" I gasped, blushing. "This is so sudden!"

"Meet me beside the old abandoned atom bomb plant!" she hissed, shrugging well-rounded shoulders and wiping the tentative smile from her face. They had eyes everywhere, eyes and spies.

I nodded, a deceptive casualness in my gesture. But my pulses were pounding.

That evening I hurried buoyantly down the winding trail to our appointed meeting place, and Bess was waiting. For an eternity our lips and bodies clung. Then she pulled away.

"Not that!" she whispered. "And not here! And not now!"

"Then you mean—?"

"Yes!"

Trembling at my own temerity, I agreed.

By an unguessable and devious route across the dimensions we came at last to The Place. The Place where we were to taste of the deepest and darkest and most *strengstens und polizeisesh verboten* of the forbidden pleasures! And there, waiting for us, was the Winter issue of PLANET STORIES, that most Paynefully edited of all the esoteric journals!

Hungry, avidly, Bess fell upon it—and I confess that I, too, was shaken by unnameable desires.

"Read this about the witch!" she commanded.

"Which witch?" I asked innocently.

But the weed of crime indeed bears bitter fruit. Inflamed to madness, Bess leaped from her recumbent position and cast aside her dark, enveloping cloak.

"Anything one of Erik Fennel's heroines can do I can do, too!" she raved. "And do it better yet!"

With those dire words, with my eyes blazing full upon her, she tore away her concealing mouse-fur brassiere and her dagger-sharp fingernails ripped to shreds her delicate pink synthisilk panties.

And there was nothing beneath!

Nothing! Nothing! NOTHING!

Stark and complete and unrelieved nothingness! Cowering and trembling, shocked beyond measure, I fled.

And that is why my curvilinear-vibrato-synchro-super-omegatron stands uncompleted while day by day the jungle encroaches upon its massive framework and the metal-eating fungi perform their vile excavations.

So, Payne, I am appealing for your help. Make Fennel produce a new sort of heroine, one that the hero (that'll be me, of course) couldn't possibly love for anything but her mentality. Make her flat-chested and scrawny and a prudish old spinster to boot.

Perhaps with the aid of such a female I can complete my masterpiece, my curvilinear-vibrato-synchro-super-omegatron—though what I'll do with it when it's finished I'm damned if I know.

Yours in frustration,

MARTIN AXELROD

SIRIUS MATTER

82 Westminster Drive, N.E.,
Atlanta 5, Georgia

DEAR EDITOR:

Pick one? Second row, third from the left—Oh! Oh! Forgot where I was sitting when you said that. Second choice is the illo to *Zero Hour* on page 40. I can watch the little minx grow up and (maybe) learn something I didn't read in a book. If Samuel Johnson hadn't been so far ahead of me, I might have become famous by saying, "Knowledge is of two kinds: We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it."

Thought Chad (Oliver, that is) was supposed to be in college? He get a pink slip from them, too? Those college professors are hard to fool . . . if the high-heeled members of the faculty hadn't taken pity on me I wouldn't have made it, either. Or did I? Seems like I'm forgetting something . . . maybe it's a twinge of conscience for letting two girl classmates lie like State Troopers just to keep me from being expelled? Could be.

For the benefit of our budding space-author, Bill Oberfeld, let me say that "straight up" when applied to space travel has more sinuous curves than a Fennel Cutie stirs into motion when she glides into her bathing pool. And besides—(Jewett, you stay out of this. A copy of Ley's *Rockets* isn't an open door to knowledge, but it's a big help if you understand the principles to which he refers)—let's get back to our space-ship before it melts.

There are no less than five distinctly separable motions entering into the problem of space travel: (1) gravity and rotation of the earth; (2) the rotary effect of the moon's orbit around the earth; (3) the orbital motions of the earth and moon around the sun; (4) the rotation of our solar system as a whole; and (5) the orbital motions of all the solar systems within the galaxies of the universe. There may be others, but there should be no need of calculating their effect until we plan on going beyond Pluto. (Don't forget your rubbers—Ed.)

Just as Bill says, the angular momentum of the earth's surface is about 1,000 miles per hour near the Equator. But the plane of this velocity is inclined away from the ecliptic, and at no time does it come into exact phase with the orbital velocity of the earth. The resulting torque passes through a series of phase relations which exactly match the positions of earth and moon in their orbit

around the sun. In addition to this we are out of phase with the angular and orbital velocities of all the members which go to make up our solar system. These different phase angles combine and pass through a continuously variable multiplicity of torque-fields which knit our solar system together as a unit and determines the direction each body must move.

All these things combine their forces in such a way that they direct us to the center of the earth with a touch so gentle that it equals the "pull" of gravity—a mere 25,200 miles per hour, calculated at the surface of the earth. We may interpret it as a gentle hint to remain on the earth until we gain enough wisdom to launch our space-ship in a direction which will not interfere with the more important operations of the universe. The Space Patrol of the Universe does not ask questions. One wrong move in space is enough to find yourself shot down with a terminal impact that will drive your teeth so deep into the soil that nothing but a new plate will ever make things taste natural again! I'm afraid Bill's easterly take-off is out—too many ways for him to get into trouble before he can see it coming.

Take my word for it, Bill—when you build that ramp which is to guide your ship out of earth's field of influence be sure you point it at the North Star. Follow that course until your ship veers off of its own accord. Then adjust your controls for the planetary orbit you want to reach. Stop your atomic motors. And go to bed. You'll have nothing further to do until you slip into the orbit of your chosen home-of-the-future. It's going to be a long, long time before we see you again—so goodbye, Bill. Happy hunting! And don't expect the Plutonians to send you back. I'm sending you to Sirius!

Nice fellow, too. Only he kept getting in my hair. Oh! Bill! Can you still hear me? By now you should know what Telis (male) Streiff meant when he said, "One more fan . . . gone." When you get to Sirius, drop me a postcard. I'll be waiting!

Who's next? Jo Kennedy? He didn't read my prize-winning letter, so I'll just let him hitch-hike someplace or other. Lin Carter mentioned me, but he's already started on a trip around the galaxy. Next time he comes by I'll pretend he's a duck. Blind shooting, so to speak. Sneary voted for me so guess I'll have to let him off—temporarily. Streiff is still delirious from an effort to determine his sex. Tom Jewett? This one's going to be a problem. Probably knows the name of every book I possess. Let's send him on that eastward take-off where he'll get caught in a gravity-field. Take him a million years to dig his way up through all the meteors that will fall on him. And by then I may have a book with my own name on it!

Larry Shaw can reduce his weight allowance for Zimmer by about 78 pounds. If he takes out after her she may throw off another ten pounds—all depends on whether she wants to escape, or get caught. I don't know what to do about Sigler . . . it's getting to where he knows less than I do. Is that possible?

I'm way over the two-page allowance, but what can I do? I'd like to tell you how much I enjoyed reading the last issue—all the stories were swell. Only I can't seem to figure out how a gold-plated blonde can look exactly like her black-haired rival? They don't grow up that way in Georgia!

—ROBERT A. BRADLEY

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THAT'S OOL, BROTHER

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PLP, OLD THING:

In the top floor of a great metropolitan skyscraper in down town New York is the office of an individual who holds in his two hands the happiness of millions (well, thousands, anyway) of downtrodden people.

This Great Personage (who knows, I might want to send you a story sometime, too?), one Paul L. Payne, is Editor in Chief of that famous literary journal, *PLANET STORIES*. As we approach, the scene is a lavishly decorated office with all the modern conveniences, concealed lighting, adjoining bar and built-in blonde.

Said Payne is a pale, rather stoop-shouldered individual seated behind a huge desk upon which are two high stacks of letters, one resting in a tray marked TO PRESS ROOM, the other TO FURNACE ROOM. Beside the desk are huge sacks bulging with fan mail. Payne fishes letter after letter out of the sacks, scans it listlessly, and drops it in one of the two trays. Occasionally, he stifles a bored yawn.

Suddenly there is a flash of light, a great puff of oily black smoke, and a crash that shakes the room. A tall, rather greenish character with three eyes appears, bearing in one grisly claw a letter.

"Hey, chief—" it begins, but Payne interrupts angrily.

"Lissen, Ool, I thought I told you to quit appearing like that! Scares me out of a year's growth! Stinks up the whole place, too."

"Sure, sorry chief, but this is important!"

"Well, what is it?" Payne grumbles. "It'd better be important, you know your job is to sort out the mail, a very important job. Now what is it?"

Ool holds the letter up with reverence. "It just came in. I knew you'd wanta see it, so I came up through the 8th Dimension. It's"—his voice sinks to an awed whisper, "a letter from Lin Carter!"

"Egad! Lin Carter!" Payne babbles with tears of joy streaming from his eyes. He snatches it from Ool's hand, slits it open reverently.

"Boy, lissen to this!—Lin sez he read what we laughingly call a 'gripping novel' and it wuz so gripping he fell asleep three times while reading it. Ha ha! Sez he still is rather vague on what happened to Krasna! *What a wit!* He says *Earth Is Missing* had a good plot but poor treatment. Says according to Selwyn seven thousand years from now, we'll still have slang like 'trojan-horse,' 'mike' for microphone, 'blood-bounds' for investigators, still have games like 'cops and robbers,' names like Floyd, John, Lois, etc., after 7000 years. He sez 1000 or even 2000 years ago names, slang and languages were vastly different, and why did they change? Because of growth, expansion, intermingling of races. And in the next seven thousands years, we'll expand, grow and intermingle with other worlds even more. 'Tis fantastic, sez he. Otherwise, 'twas a good story."

Payne grinned enthusiastically at Ool. "He's right as usual. We shoulda caught that. Won't happen again!"

"Yeah!" comments Ool, polishing his third eye on a silk handkerchief.

"Lessee, now," sez Payne. "He says the shorts were mostly good . . . *Duel in Black*, *Failure on Titan*, good. Pic good. But cover lousy . . . he sez it looks like the artist was wearing boxing gloves when he painted it . . . heh heh! Remind me to fire Andy!"

"He sez the Vizi was very good, this issue. Is hard to choose pic winners . . . Oliver, Kennedy, Jewett, Shaw, and Streiff all had interesting letters . . . He says one gag in Sneary's letter really killed him . . . quote 'He (Telis) is, as far as I know a male. A male *what* is another thing,' unquote . . . Haw, I thot it was a scream, too! He guesses prizes shud go to (1) Oliver, (2) Streiff, and (3) Shaw . . . gad, what keen discernment, exactly the winners I'll pick!"

Dreamily, Payne put the letter on top of the TO PRESS ROOM stack and leaned back in his overstuffed swivel-chair.

"Ah," he says humbly, "It's worth the work and criticism of being an editor just to receive letters from Carter . . ."

Egotistical lil' worm, ain't I?

—LIN CARTER

GRIPE, GRIPE, GRIPE . . .

902 N. Downey Ave.,
Downey, California

DEAR PLANET'S LOUD-MOUTHED PARASITE:

Ahhh-HAHH! I have the goods on you now. You will be forced to take a certain so-called artist out and apply a super-whzzyth ray on his tapered cranium. I refer to a certain species of the Pulpus Scrawlus, common name Vermiformous Vestal (look Vermiformis up in the dictionary) ((on second thought, why bother?)) (((it means wormy))) (((I hope))) (Hmmm . . . Vermiformous not in Webster's Unabridged; Vermiformis there means vermiform appendix—and we think a hell of a lot of Vestal in this shop —Ed.)

Having given up all hope of salvaging above paragraph, our undaunted letter-hack resumes the broken thread of conversation, one-sided as it is. Who ever saw a one-sided thread, any way?

The most glaring error committed by this blot on the fair pages of the Winter issue of good ole PS leers at the reader from page 115, illustrating *Duel in Black* (a good yarn, by th' way. No wimmin.) Story states very distinctly that scene is on moon. So Vestal draws in six planet-sized bodies. Not content with that, the man supposedly lying in shadow (presuming for argument's sake the largest body is the luminary in this case) should be by all logical observation in Earthlight, since shadow projected from spire is at right angles to shadow-casting body. Tsk.

Then, on page 67, illustrating Vaseline's *Running of the Zar*, I quote from the punch line 'neath the (ahem) illustration, "Briggs burst out of the cave, running low . . ." He ain't even hardly bent over. Phooey.

More gripes on art work: Astarita, illustrating *Earthbound* (*Marsbound* would have been a better title, no es verdad?) flattered our ten-year-old Lanya with quite a figger. Even on Mars such feminine development at such a tender age seems rather unusual. (*A case of Dimension Praecox* —Ed.)

Cover also very inaccurate. Gal should hev been red-headed, BEM should have been using whip, gun should have been backfiring. Or doesn't Anderson give a hoot in a hogshedd? Dern pretty fer all thet.

By now, Dear Editor has no doubt worn self and blue pencil to a stump. But I refuse to be silenced! The voice of the masses. Masses in the cold, cold ground, eh?

Oh nerts, I shouldda used that'n in discussing *The Earth Is Missing!* But while I'm on the

subject, I'll get off as quick as I can. Passable story, but a trifle lopsided. Science angle should have been worked up more, considering the opportunities, and less space wasted on a confusing and entirely unnecessary (too much is better than not enough, sez I) love plot. I missed the satisfaction of seeing (in imagination) the looks on the lover's faces when they had their respective motives explained to each other.

Earthbound was Bradburyish. No plot; but who cared? Excellent yarn.

Black Priestess of Varda shows Fennel as a very promising young author. In fact, it was the best story in the mag, something a lead novel hasn't snagged for y'ars upon Y'ARS. And y'ar we be at the second best, *Among the Scented Ones*. Wells had an excellent short-story plot which might have been expanded to a novel without hurting anything, but for one thing: surprise endings which are obvious in short stories (as this one was) can never hope to survive in a long-drawn-out novel. So forget I said it.

Others fair, humor in *Me, Myself, and I* welcome indeed, though it's too bad Bond couldn't have handled it. More of this type. Last humor I remember was *The Beer Trust*, way back when.

I have been dreading this, but no conscientious hack ever skips LA VIZI. One thing that will sell your mag if the stories are printed in invisible ink on transparent paper and the art is scenes of polar bears building igloos in a howling blizzard, is the letter department. I wonder if any oily, flattering, sleazy apple-polisher has told you it's the best in any of the pros. If he hasn't, let me be the first to assure you it is. There, happy? What? YOU KNEW IT ALL THE TIME? Why, you ungrateful two-faced low-down . . .

Hold on, that won't get my letter printed. Oh, who cares. My typer finger needed the exercise anyhow. First to Chaddo (who else?). Second to muh veddy good pal Rick (he promised to let me look at it if I helped him win an original) and third to Telis, the Tittering Thought-Twister.

And, belatedly, to Sigler: I.Q. is based on education, not actual intellectual power. And therein lies the fallacy of race "stupidity." Au' voir.

—JOHN VAN COUVERING

READS THREE STORIES AND—

4170 Utah St.,
St. Louis 16, Mo.

PLANET'S LOONY PANEGYRIST:

The great hall, packed to capacity with the teeming millions of Fomalhaut IV, was enveloped in deathly silence. Only the majestic form upon the platinum throne stirred restlessly, watching the far-off gates through half-closed eyes. A shout arose from a million throats as the great portals surged open, and the air was rent with the shrieks of screaming trumpets. The crowd parted to make way for the advancing herald. The eyes of the regal figure upon the throne lit with anticipation. "Has it, then, arrived?" he asked in a hoarse, strained voice. Tenderly, he lifted the winter issue of *PLANET* from the mat of grulzak skins at his feet. Quickly, he flicked the pages, smacking his lips as he discovered that which he sought. "At last! At last!" His voice rose to an incoherent crescendo. "Now I can send for the non-condensing Sanaton 'Demonstrator' Pipe!" (There, PLP, wasn't that preliminary worthy of Chad Oliver? NO, CHAD! Put down that ato-gun! AAAAAAGHHH . . .)



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Seriously, though, that ad on the back cover was almost as good as Anderson's masterpiece in front. Not that it was bad. But wasn't that blue frog with a bad case of hives, and the beautiful (???) priestess with the wotzis on her shoulder enough to rouse the ire of any true fan? The art was good, but the whole thing was a little silly. But enough of that. Let's get on to the congrats, shall we?

The inside illos, on the average, were the best I've ever seen in *PLANET*. I'm glad to see that you kept to an absolute minimum of Vestal Jewett to the contrary, Vestal's mob scenes are the worst pieces of art ever to (dis)grace a science-fiction magazine.

I haven't read but a few of the stories (I skipped the lead novel as a matter of principle, surmising it to be just another slugging & sex story by that arch-hack, Fennel), but I'll comment on those I have.

First (after La Vizi, of course) I read *Earth Is Missing*. This novella is better than the usual tale of its type. I had resolved to devote a paragraph to correcting some errors I detected, but I later relented. I have one criticism to make about it, and this is ancient the many fisticuffical (huh?) (*Fistic—Ed.*) encounters of our hero. Got kinda boring after the first five, doncha think?

Second, I decided to look into *Earthbound*. It was very well-written, interesting, AND—I enjoyed it. BUT . . . it wasn't very scientific.

Third, *Me, Myself and I*. Well-written, but was ruined for me by a few glaring errors. Listen, McCarthy would never have moved the rock, because he would have been interrupted by his twin from an alternate world. But, if he'd never moved the rock, there would never have been an alternate world. Get me? I thought not. One of the hardest things to write is a time-travel yarn of this kind. The only perfect story along the same lines as Putnam's tale is *By His Bootstraps*, by Anson McDonald. This story has five principle characters, and they're all the same man. I advise you not to read it unless you have an hour to spare, because it requires all your concentrated mental ability (stop blushing, PLP, I'm not talking to you). (*Yeah, keep us out of that—Ed.*)

Well, that takes care of the stories. I guess I'll get around to the rest later . . . maybe. Oh, before I forget, did I tell you I'm campaigning for a sequel to *Black Silence*? It offers excellent possibilities for such a thing.

Miscellany: I suppose that error in the spelling of Varda on the title page is responsible for Andy's cover painting of the Witch. What you need is a good proofreader.

La Vizi (by the way, since everyone calls it that, why don't you make it official?) was pretty good. Give the first prize to Lin Carter. Second will go to Chad (maybe he'll even forgive my opening). Third goes to Rick Sney. I'll overlook his "Die? I thought I'd laugh." That gag has a genealogy longer than a JoKe letter. Sney stole it from Chad in one of your competitor's mags, who evidently stole it from Henry Hasse in the Summer, 1942, issue of La Vizi (it was, I believe, bound in with some new mag called *PLANET*, which I acquired recently at a back-dated mag shop. Ghu only knows who Hasse pilfered it from. Hmmm, I suppose I've just alienated three potential votes, but I just couldn't stand that pun any more. I hope somebody votes for me, though. That crack in the living room wall is very unsightly. An Anderson would be just the thing. (*Covers we keep—Ed.*)

Hark! What's that sound? Zounds, it's PLP

and his horde of trained rejection slips! I have just time to finish this letter before they come. Gad! I shall be put to work in the hack mines of Neptune! I hear their knock. Farewell.

—DAN MULCAHY

BY—BUT NOT IN—ANGER

520 Highland Ave.,
Ottawa, Ont., Canada

DEAR EDITOR:

Not since I first saw one of my letters in print in one of the pro-mags have I got such a real thrill as when I saw that I had won an original. It really means a lot to me, because I admire STF and everything connected with it more than anything else in the world and I can't describe the feeling of knowing that I am to receive an original of one of the artists I admire so much. Also it means a lot to know that the fans who I think a lot of liked my letter well enough to vote me in. All I can say is thanx, fans and Mr. Payne. It's sorta a delayed birthday present and you literally couldn't have given me anything that would mean more. James! My platinum original-frame, please!

As a reward (heh), I am giving my whole letter to Ye Ed's pride and . . . ah . . . joy, The Vizigraph and to the fans who make it with him. La Vizi was exceptionally good in the Winter 47 ish (Jro says that's because I wasn't in it, but don't listen to him) and so picking my votes was tough, but I come up with William (Bill to us) Oberfield first. For telling all, I vote for Lee (Telis to the world) Streiff, second. And for a nice commentary Linwood (Lin if you're in a hurry) Carter, third.

Seems PLP (*PLANET's* Lively Penpusher?) is annoyed at some of us for not going all the way with Ray Bradbury's *Zero Hour*. Well, Rick Sney said it all for me. A fine yarn, mind you, but I just don't go along all the way with some of its basic concepts. Ray Bradbury is sometimes like that as in *Rocket Summer*—magnificently written, but with an unsound idea.

However, we did not "get critical" just because you praised it in dignified fashion in the blurb. I think most, if not all the fans criticize with a fair degree of objectivity. If you used more blurbs like the Z. H. one I would be pleased. No end. Going down a line or two, may I remind you that it is a reward if you don't shut up quickly! I like to see editorial comment inserted at crucial points and, because you opened up a little more in that respect this ish and showed what a really fine Ed you are, I now place you in the top rank, well, near the top. Pleased?

Ahhh, Chad. It was hard not to vote for your piece. It was one of those "Oliver" masterpieces . . . original, clever opening fable, then shrewd comments. I wish you would write a yarn. Also you made the good, patient Editor happy by praising *Zero Hour*, which is good. Why so hard on the other yarns, Chaddo? Struck me as pretty fine, although I heartily agree with your comments on women, stories with same and oysters. Someone had to squelch Sigler (he of the Colt vs. Blaster) and Chad did it nicely. In Chad's last two paragraphs I think he has as much good advice-to-editor as most of us say in a page. Every word bears careful attention, PLP.

Joe Kennedy was also hard to keep off the originals list, but I "tilt an eyebrow skyward" at his casual statement that "a human-interest story can score a knock-out over tales stuffed to the

gills with supertechnical jargon." I'm all for "human interest" in STF, but I think that in developing this angle some authors and readers are forgetting that science fiction exists primarily to enable authors to put over new scientific ideas with the knowledge that they will have an appreciating, non-scoffing audience. While science fiction is fiction and, therefore, uses all types of literary techniques, it is *also* science and, hence, it is a virtue to be able to use "supertechnical jargon." One of STF's greatest claims to recognition is that it presents new scientific thoughts and interests its readers in science. Science fiction has gone a long way in working out the probabilities of the future, but there are still countless problems attached to each branch of science which the authors have not made a try at yet.

Rick Sneary, Tom Jewett, Larry Shaw also had fine letters and, as I said the Viz was really swell this time.

Yours STFly,

—R. R. ANGER

WE GO BI-MONTHLY IN 2000 A. D.

6310 Madison Rd.,
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Emerging from an overwhelming power of fatigue, I take my stand at the old typer and proceed to tell everybody how much they are allowed to like the current *PLANET STORIES*. The fatigue, incidentally, was brought on from reading the novel. While *Black Priestess* was highly original in spots, the overall effect was one of tiring style and plot, done up in a purely hackish style. Fennel seems very much like McDowell, with the prevalent injections of sex and action, not to mention titles.

Things get a little more pleasant later on, though.

Earth Is Missing (oh fudge, I must have mislaid it somewhere) started out like a pure private eye opus, but really got swinging in later chapters. Too many socks on the hero's bean kept it from being excellent, but as it stands it is very good.

Running of the Zar was the *PLANET* irony story for this issue, which was a little better than most along this line. That plot is getting a little tiring, though. *Earthbound* was rather poor.

Nothing else outstanding. Artwork pretty good this time, especially the pp. 4-5 double spread. And Vestal, of all people, takes top honors for page 113.

Cover was not up to the standard set by Anderson's first two covers, but was acceptable.

With the minor comments out of the way, I see the head of La Vizi looming before me. My my, can this be true? Oliver and Kennedy present, not to mention the return of Jewett. Uh . . . look fellows, I know a lot of you are my correspondents, but it *does* say to vote for the best letter, and . . . heheheh . . . Chad wrote it, as usual. Give the boy his pick of the pics. Kennedy runs second, and *amis* Jewett, Carter, and Sneary can battle it out for third place. Better watch Carter, fellows, he fights dirty.

Now for a few sage comments concerning the epistles of my fellow letter hacks. Firstly, Chad, you were right that I deserved something more than an original. Everyone else obviously thought so, too, hence they didn't insult me by

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PS's Feature Flash

EMMETT McDOWELL has been one of our major contributors for a long time—too long for us not to have introduced him to you. "Outcasts of Solar III," which we publish in this issue, you will recognize as a sequel to "Beyond the Yellow Fog." You will remember his "Black Silence," too. We have another novel of his coming up, a honey of a job, that—but why spoil it for you? In the meantime, here he is:

Frankly, when I sat down to begin this I was appalled. I still am. The truth would make such dull reading. At length I took my typewriter between my teeth, and plunged in.

Here's the result, but I wash my hands of it. It's without plot, without a hero or a villain and without an end.

I was born at Sentinel, Oklahoma, in the year 1914. That's a matter of vital statistics and there isn't much point in concealing it. Shortly thereafter I was removed in Kentucky where I have remained ever since except for sporadic jaunts through the South and West.

I am married, have a boy of four and a half who has the uncommonly good sense not to want to be a writer. He wants to be an airplane pilot.

I like to travel. But I almost had enough of it during the war when I was in the Merchant Marine. I like the country—hunting and fishing, swimming and horseback riding.

Once I won a horse in a poker game, a five-gaited saddle mare. But when I went after her, she was blind. This was not as bad as it sounds. The mare was young; the blindness wasn't hereditary. She had lost her eyes by getting fouled in bob wire.

So I took her to a friend of mine, a farmer, and we made an agreement. He was to keep her, feed her, take care of her for half of the colts that she produced. One year he was to get her colt. The next one would be mine.

Only somehow, he never got around to taking her to the stud and she finally died of frustration.

I like to write. I haven't any axe to grind, unless it's about people who think a story should fulfill some purpose other than entertainment. "Did you enjoy it?" That should be the final criterion. I'd like to be able to write stories that you couldn't put down and that you regretted coming to an end.

Oh yes, I'm an omnivorous reader—including

voting for me. I appreciate that, boys. I see Wigodsky has relented. Someone should tell the Malicious Michael the difference between fantasy and STF, tho. Since when is invasion from interstellar beings fantasy?

Only Jewett would have spotted the six fingers on the cover boy. Gad, he must go over the illo's with a magnifying glass. Tsk tsk, no poem from Carter. Can this be? Streiff and Oberfield I ignore. They have owed me letters for far too long a time to remain on friendly terms with me.

The complete indifference that Sigler displays to the seething comments of La Vizifhends tickles me. Only he could do it. My goodness, Larry Shaw is back. It's been ages since I've seen any of his stuff. The boy has mellowed with age, I

the Vizigraph. In fact I read the Vizigraph with considerable trepidation.

—EMMETT McDOWELL

W. J. MATTHEWS wrote a terrific story, "The Derelict." He had us all, editors, fans and just plain readers wandering around that Martian desert for days—babbling, reeling, staggering toward monnmental mirages, our tongues leathery and cracked with thirst—honest, we never thought we'd get out. He's taken pity on us and written us another to save our souls. Meet the creator of Jeff Thorne:

I was overwhelmed at your kind request for my autobiography, delighted to reply. The last gentlemen seeking it insisted on fingerprints, too.

My wife graciously offered to write in my stead, considering she could think of a great deal more to say about me than I, but the offer was declined. Isn't it enough that I have blue eyes, brown hair, 27 teeth and one hangnail?

I was born May 24, 1913, and shortly thereafter the first World War broke out. I believe there is no connection. My father left San Francisco for Canada, but we traced him. After serving as an inspector in the cavalry, he returned to this country with his family and settled in the Northwest, at Corvallis, Oregon.

Here I attended school, high school, Oregon State, and other social functions. Emerging from University of Oregon, I landed in the Depression. You remember the Depression. The dollar was worth a dollar fifty, but no one had a dime. Carving a career for myself, starting from scratch, I find myself still scratching, still chiseling. Life-guard, art teacher, commercial artist, rubber engraver—I worked onward and upward. The war came. The draft came. I came. I went back. They had my classification, but, officers and gentlemen that they were, they refused to tell me.

I helped Henry Kaiser, in the tanker shipyard at Swan Island. We became famous. He became rich. I write for PLANET STORIES. Would I trade? Today I look back upon my life. Gaggling, I look forward. I have a wife and two children. I have a typewriter. I have a brain teeming with ideas. I should be able to hock something.

What do you think?

—W. J. MATTHEWS

P. S.: Dead cats, C.O.D., I will not receive.

think. Sounds like a whiskey ad.

Before this humble one trots off, I have a question. Every issue a couple of people ask about PS going bi-monthly, but no answer is ever printed. I take the matter into my own hands. I demand a showdown right here. Is there any chance of PLANET going on a bi-monthly basis in the future? Answer yes, no, or ghuythropl, but answer! (Ghuythropl—Ed.)

Anyway I think all . . . uh . . . fandom speaks when I say I hope you're still publishing in 2000 A.D.

Cynicerely,

—JACK CLEMENTS

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BLACK BIOLOGY, LAVENDER LUST . . .

c/o Mrs. Allen Baker,
Kerrville, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

Oil up the old swivel chair and fire up your briar, Sir Payne—and let's discourse a spell on the Winter P.S. Hokay?

We'll examine the cover first, 'cause I'm a conformist. Not that there's anything to say about it that hasn't been said many times before; it's like having to describe the same ice cube twenty different ways. We have, per usual, Our Boy, Our Girl, and Poor Bozo, whose only function in life seems to be to get ripped asunder every three months. Also one small, blue lemur as an added attraction. "Tain't purty, but I'll betcha that Boris had fun putting it together. Of course, you know how Boris is . . .

Fictionally, things were a bit brighter this trip. The least of the stories were readable—which makes my toenails curl with pleasure, because I'd a lot rather praise than criticize. (I could always not say anything, but, suh, that's a coward's way out!)

There were three yarns that I thot fairly nice. *Abernathy's Failure on Titan*, despite the stereotyped title, was well done and the opening situation was carefully and logically explained, for a change. *Me, Myself, and I*, by Putnam, was a clever run-through of the paradoxes of time travel; not sensational, but quite tasty. I hope that this is a sign that PS is branching out a bit—time travel is a little out of your line, is it not? *Earth Is Missing!* the best story that I have run across by Carl Selwyn. It was typically fantastic, with all the usual characters, but some of your other writers could certainly stand a few lessons from Selwyn—he handled it all in a very competent, non-offensive fashion. He even made me like the Bear, and if there ever was a silly character, that's it.

So much for the good stories—although Guth's *Earthbound* was a praiseworthy effort, at least.

The novel, *Black Priestess of Varda*, by Friend Fennel, was pretty poor. One of my professors was talking to me about pulp fiction one time, and he mentioned that one fault was poor taste—anything to be sensational. He added that, naturally, that wasn't always true; contrary to popular opinion, all college professors do not peer at you over thick lenses and refer to the pulps as trash. He liked Bradbury more than I did, which is practically impossible to do.

But we wonder. Fennel seemed to be writing down to his readers, which is seldom flattering, and his taste, as hinted above, was non-existent. Suggested titles for future stories of this type: *Black Biology*, *Lavender Lust*, *Purple Passion*.

Random thoughts: In *Abernathy's* tale, a character mentions that it occurs in the "year of civilization 745." On the next page, the bright little heroine remarks that Hitler lived six hundred years ago. Taking 1940 as Hitler's approximate date, we get the date for the start of civilization as 1895: Give a few years margin for error—1895 to 1905. In order, at that time, we find the Spanish American War, the Boxer Rebellion, the Boer War, and the Russo-Japanese War. Ah yes, civilization got off to a good start. Reach fer th' moon, yuh ornery varmint.

La Vizi—I love La Vizi. Lessee now. First place to Larry Shaw; don't know when I've enjoyed a letter more. Second to Joe Kennedy, who couldn't write a bad letter if he tried. Third place is hard to pick. Oliver? No, he's just trying to write like I do. Sneary? He didn't like *Zero Hour*. Carter? He didn't either. Streiff? He voted for Sigler, that Gap Between Knowledge and Intelligence. Nice letter, tho. Nertz—give it to Tom Jewett; he likes Bradbury, I like him.

O horror—I'm over the limit. Gotta run quick before a game warden nabs me. Be back next summer, or next vacation, or sometime. Set the traps.

Ever thine,

—CHAD OLIVER

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of PLANNET SROAKS, published quarterly at New York, N. Y. for Oct. 1, 1947.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.: Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Paul L. Payne, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the *PLANET SROAKS* and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) PAUL L. PAYNE,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 24th day of September, 1947.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1948.)